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by Lon Williams

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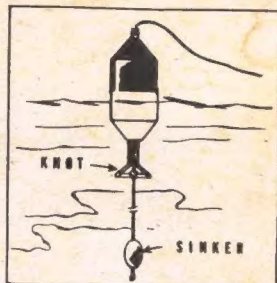
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★ **ACTION-PACKED** ★ **WESTERN**

VOL. 4

May, 1958

NO. 4

Two Tophand Novels

FEUDIN' GUNS Harlan Clay 8

Pat Curran had long since deserted the owlhoot trail; he'd had his taste of the wild life and didn't cotton to it. Now he wanted to run the ranch, as his father had always expected him to. But Pat's brother, Larry, was different; Larry liked the lawless life . . .

NINE DEADLY DEEDS Lon Williams 46

Brock Tuel was George Almond's natural enemy — the one who would try to have Almond put out of the way once he learned what George was up to: finding proof of the famous Montedura land title. So Almond figured he might as well be prepared and let Tuel know just what was afoot!

Special Features

LIGHT OF THE EAGLE'S PLUME Pete Carter 5

Friends at Hudson Bay Company called this Indian chief's heir Benjamin, and he and the schoolteacher became good friends. Then . . .

THE PASSING OF BELIAL YOUNG (verse) Edward Garner 97

A kick most crude he straightway rued . . .

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, Editor

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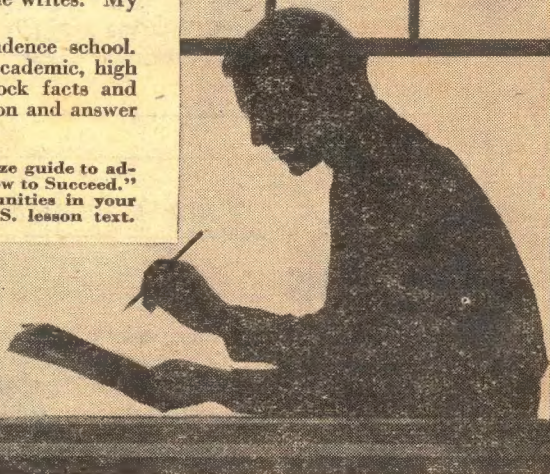
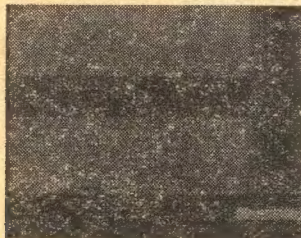
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LIGHT OF THE EAGLE'S PLUME

Special Feature

by Pete Carter

BACK IN the early days of Montana, when such names as Marcus Whitman and Jason Lee meant so much to the great Northwest, a Yankee school teacher—graduate of Harvard—came west to teach. In after years he recounted many of his experiences to old friends, and in particular to one Hezekiah Butterworth, a well-known Boston Editor. Butterworth was so deeply impressed with the school teacher's descriptions of this beautiful new land and the tales of the Indians—one in particular of the trip to Black Eagle falls—that he made a special trip over the Rocky mountains to view the original scenes associated with these Indian stories. He came out over the Canadian Pacific and returned by way of Great Falls.

He spent some time at Great Falls and wrote a glowing account of that—as he called it—beautiful city; included in his writings was "The Little Log Cabin School House of the Columbia," but the story that impressed most people, was the tragic one of "Light of the Eagle's Plume."

"Light of the Eagle's Plume," who had been named Benjamin by his English friends of the Hudson Bay company, desired to attend the white man's school; and accompanied by his father—the stately old Chief Umatilla—presented himself at the Log-cabin school one morning.

Benjamin was the very life and light of his father, the old chief having lost six sons of the plague, and he lived only for this remaining son. What was joy and happiness for

"Light of the Eagle's Plume," was joy and happiness for Umatilla; and that which caused grief or unhappiness to the son, likewise caused grief to the father. Benjamin was a handsome young Indian, very bright and clever, and was anxious to learn some of the white man's ways.

Umatilla was said to be like Mas-sasoit of the early colonial history of Plymouth in his friendship for the whites. Surrounded by war-like tribes, Umatilla had been a man of peace. He was a lover of nature, and every shining cloud to his eye was a thing of beauty; he personified every thing like the ancient Greeks. He talked in poetic figures; to him the sky was alive; every event had a soul, and his mind dwelt upon the great truths of Nature until he had become more of a philosopher than a ruler.

SO IT WAS that Umatilla chief of the Cascades, was well pleased to see the young chief, "Light of the Eagle's Plume" attend the white man's school. With great dignity he made the school teacher understand that he wished Benjamin taught that which would best fit him to become a truly great and noble chief and rule his people wisely, for not many years did the old chief Umatilla have to live.

The white school-master and Benjamin became great friends. The first time the Indian boy's attention was called to the letter "A", he said it was a fox trap—which made his white teacher smile. One of the text books used at the time was one telling of the

[Turn To Page 7]

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 "I just want to tell you how much I enjoy your lessons for the Tenor Banjo, and how rapidly I am progressing. Lessons are so simple, anyone can understand them."—Andrew Schneider, Hanna, Wyoming. (Picture at left)



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 "I had tried several times to start music lessons. I had been depending on a teacher before. Now I play at church, etc."—Mrs. P. J. Tatman, Sycamore, Illinois.

MAIL COUPON NOW—PLAY NEXT MONTH

Light of the Eagle's Plume

(continued from page 5)

Lewis and Clark expedition, and of a nest of wonderful black eagles found—thus, the naming of Black Eagle falls, on the Missouri in Montana.

The description so fired the imagination of young Benjamin that he begged his white teacher to undertake a trip with him to get the plumes of the black eagle. The old chief was willing, since the boy's heart was set upon it. Eagerly Benjamin made plans for the trip—the black eagle's plumes—rare indeed, were fitting adornment for a chief. "One for you, father, and one for me, and one for Tilicum" (his name for the school teacher) said Benjamin, and he continued earnestly, "You will always wear yours, father."

"Always," said the old chief gravely.

"And I will always wear mine," promised the young chief.

There was to be vacation in the school that fall; and in the beautiful month of October, the Yankee school teacher and Benjamin set forth on their journey to Black Eagle falls.

Under the skillful guidance of the young Indian, they made the head waters of the Columbia, packing the light canoe across to the Jefferson river; and thence sailing down the Missouri to Black Eagle falls. There were days of such beauty that, for many hours at a time, the white school teacher was content to lie on his back and dream as the canoe glided through scenes of surpassing loveliness. The young Indian chief might have been a mythological Greek god propelling a wondrous boat through enchanted waters, so regal was his bearing, so inspired his countenance. The two fell in with various Indian tribes—doubtless they met up with war-like Blackfeet and the kindly

Flatheads—but always the unmistakable rank of "Light of the Eagle's Plume" and the kindly manner of the white man won them good treatment.

THE WHITE man was greatly impressed with the country he saw, and knew that Montana would be a great state some day. He stood for long hours on the present site of Great Falls and visioned a fine city with immense water power. Benjamin was greatly excited upon finding the location of the black eagles' nest as had been described in the Lewis and Clark book. The majestic birds were there, and rose slowly as the young Indian climbed to the nest. Eagerly he sought—and found—just three plumes in the black eagles' nest.

The return trip was made without mishap; the old chief Umatilla was happy in his son's happiness and the success of the trip, and each wore the plumes of the black eagle.

Soon after the trip, there was a great ceremonial affair—Potlach—so called. The aged chief took this occasion to also celebrate the marriage of his son, "Light of the Eagle's Plume," to the young Indian maiden of his choice. On the second day of the feast, as Umatilla was closing a speech to his people, a young Indian came running swiftly, and with a piercing cry fell at the old chief's feet. Benjamin had been smitten with the plague, and nothing could be done that would save his life.

The grief of Umatilla at the death of his son was beyond expression. For a day and a night he absented himself in the forest. Upon his return, he requested the burial of "Light of the Eagle's Plume" to be like that of the

[Turn To Page 92]

Pat Curran, and his brother, Larry, had both ridden owlhoot trails when they broke away from home. But Pat had long since deserted outlawry, and now that his father was dead, he intended to run the ranch as the elder Curran always hoped he would. Only there was still Larry — and Larry preferred the wild and lawless ways...

FEUDIN' GUNS

NOVEL of BOOT HILL BROTHERS

by Harlan Clay

THE SAGGING brim of a dust-laden Stetson slanted low over his slitted eyes, Pat Curran jogged slowly across the desert toward the setting sun.

The purple haze deepened as his sweat-streaked roan threaded through bunched spear grass and bristling thickets of prickly pear. The sinking sun silhouetted the distant Dragoons, burnishing their jagged crests with glowing crimson. But the grey-shirted

rider had no eye for scenery. His thoughts were upon a scrap of paper, torn from the *Tuscon Gazette*, that reposed in his pants pocket. He knew the curt announcement by heart:

25 Dollars Reward.

For whereabouts of Patrick and Laurence Curran, sons of John Curran, deceased, Apache Valley, Ariz.

P. Williams, (Attorney),
Apache City.

"Larry and his men
kidnapped the girl."



In his mind's eye the solitary rider again saw the square, seamed features of his father, the jutting stubborn jaw, the deepset dark eyes. Yeah, the old man had been tougher than rawhide, unyielding as a lava knob. He never spared the spur on himself, his sons, or his crew.

Old memories stirred the rider—riding herd at fourteen; top ramrod at sixteen; no trips to town, no dances, no fun. Well, he had fooled the old mosshorn at eighteen, when he had saddled up by moonlight and hit for the border.

Time had softened his resentment. Perhaps the old man wouldn't have been so tough if Ma had lived. He was just, anyway; he paid his sons top wages, like his hard-bitten crew, even if he had made them stow away every dollar. He had to be tough to build the slim stake he'd saved as construction laborer into the Bar-C, with twenty punchers and herds that grazed

from the Tortulas to the Apache River.

Too, it seemed as if his brother Larry had broken out of the home corral. Well, the kid was always somewhat wild. Maybe he was riding home, too, sorry he couldn't grasp the old man's calloused hand and say, "Shake, Pa, an' let bygones be bygones!" Well it was too late now.

The sharp crack of a Winchester rifle echoed faintly across the sage, jerking Pat Curran out of his reverie. Ahead, the dark, uneven mass of weathered rock marked Buffalo Wells, where he figured on spreading his blankets for the night, bulked dim in the twilight. As he searched the gathering gloom, a second shot, a third split the silence.

The crashing snarl of guns and whining lead reverberated against the piled mass of grey rock as the fusillade grew in intensity. Every sense alert, the rider followed the progress

of the fight with his ears. At least four guns were blazing. A hoarse yell, abruptly cut short, floated through the still air. "One tagged!" muttered Pat grimly.

Gradually the firing slackened, became slow and steady as though the unseen marksmen had hit ground and were picking their marks with care. Now he could glimpse the winking gun flashes, booming and dying in the dark.

Swinging out of leather, he looped the reins of his pony round the limb of a squat mesquite and jerked his Winchester out of its scabbard. With a soft click he levered the shell into the breach and slid forward through the desert growth.

An outcropping ledge of lava protruded from the baked earth and slanted into the air. Stretched flat against the broad, serrated edge he worked slowly upwards. Reaching the top, he lay on his chest, head uplifted, searching the night.

THE INVISIBLE marksman below fired again and again, each time creeping closer to the glowing fire. Pat's dark eyes followed the play; the two attackers were steadily closing in.

"That hombre in the Wells is shore in a hot spot," he murmured. "Mebbe I can cut down th' odds, even though those jaspers got him in a crossfire."

He cuddled his cheek against the smooth rifle stock and waited patiently. With the next flash—not a hundred yards ahead, the Winchester spanged—twice. A heavy body thrashed around awhile in the brush, then there was silence.

Swinging his smoking barrel toward the left, Pat waited for the other attacker to give his position away, but the firing had ceased. A shout reached his ears, then the snapping and crackling of brush as a man fought blindly through the undergrowth, finally the rapid tattoo of a pony's hooves dying away in the eternal silence of the desert.

Curran inched his way down to ground level and returned to his pony. Mounting, he walked the animal toward the Wells, searching for a sign of the man he had hit. In the faint starlight he sighted a body behind a boulder. Features contorted, a swarthy-faced Mexican sprawled on his back, sightless eyes staring into infinity. His big steeple-peaked sombrero lay in the cholla.

The smouldering campfire blazed high as the hooves of Pat's pony clattered over the rocky approach to the spring. He walked the roan into the flickering circle of light. A tall figure, Winchester at the ready, emerged from the shadows. From long habit, Pat sized up his man with a searching glance. The stranger topped six feet, was clad in a checked shirt and faded levis. Open to the waist, his shirt revealed a broad, hairy chest. The firelight accentuated his strong jawline, with a stubble of black beard. Above a high-arched nose, two penetrating eyes were set deep in dark features. Plenty tough, thought Pat. Back in the chaparral he glimpsed two hobbled ponies.

"Guess you're the jasper what broke up th' party," commented the stranger in deep, even tones. His white teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

"What's th' trouble," asked Pat, dismounting.

The tall man shook his head. "Who knows? I was cookin' supper when they jumped me. First slug knocked the coffee pot outa my hand. If'n them jaspers could shoot I'd be cold meat by now. My handle's Sexton, they call me Silent. Reckon I talk too much." Again that silent mirthless laugh. He eyed Pat enquiringly and the rider noted he hadn't dropped his gun.

"Pat Curran," he returned. "Reckon we tagged one apiece."

Sexton nodded. "They couldn't hit a barn."

"Out for loot," replied Pat indifferently. "Th' border's lousy with th' covotes." He eased the cinch on his roan, slipped off the bridle and led it to the soring flowing cool and silent out of the rocky debris at the base of the towering pile.

"Lemme have yore coffee pot," said Sexton, "mine's sprung a leak, mebbe we'll git some supper now th' ruckus is over."

SUPPER over, the two sat propped against their saddles, smoking brown-papered quirlies. Piecing together the few sparse fragments of information Sexton let fall, Pat gathered he was a wandering puncher with a yen for prospecting. This was not unusual; bearded men, with patient plodding Jennies, had wandered around the Tortulas and through the desert as long as he could remember. But something told Pat that this Silent Sexton was no prospector. He was too alert, too masterful. His leather vest and twin hide-butted guns struck a false note. Yet there was a pick and shovel leaning against the packed kaks by his spooled bedroll.

The object of his thoughts crushed a butt beneath his boot. "So you're one of John Curran's boys. Heard about yuh. Bin mosevin' around the Valley, found color in th' Tortulas. Reckon yuh know yore old man stopped a slug—rustlers."

Pat's head jerked up. "Did they get th' swine?"

Sexton shrugged his broad shoulders. "Guess not."

"Was Larry around?"

"Nope. Ride far?"

Pat's eyes hardened. Silent Sexton had a habit of abruptly changing the subject, and he asked a lot of questions for a silent man. "South of the Rio Grande."

"Ah—ever run across Mike Mc-

Grew an' his hellions? They hang out around there, been raisin' Cain on th' border fer years."

"Seems like," admitted Pat slowly.

"Cleaned an outfit I rode fer down t' th' last calf," said Sexton, watching the other through half-closed eyes. "I knocked th' hoss from under one hairpin, but he crawled away in th' brush." The dark-faced stranger paused for a minute. "He was a dead ringer fer you!"

Pat Curran sprang to his feet like an unleashed steel spring. His right hand snaked down to the worn butt of his hogleg, his eyes glinting angrily in the firelight, fastened on the other man's unperturbed features. "Meanin' what?"

The stranger looked up lazily, his deep voice placating. "Yuh don't have t' take it personal, pard. I'm right careless with words. Every time I open my big mouth I put my hoof in it. I recoll'ct now that this jasper had a scar."

Slowly, Pat relaxed, sinking slowly down beside the fire again, but his eyes, still suspicious, were fastened on the other's face. He rolled another quirly. They sat on in a strained silence for some time. Sexton broke the strain. "Reckon I'll hit th' sack," he grunted. When Pat nodded silently he rolled out his blankets. "See yuh at sunup."

At dawn, Pat sluiced his head and shoulders in the cool water of the spring. Sexton's hobbled ponies moved through the chaparral, but the dark-featured man had disappeared. As Pat kindled a fire, the tall man appeared, threading through the mesquite growths. Two rifles were bunched under one arm, six-guns and knives dangled from the other. With a nod he dumped the weapons beside the fire. His sinewy fingers circled two rolls of notes. With a silent laugh and a subtle mockery in his hard eyes he extended the currency toward Pat.

"Loot. I reckon yuh got first claim."

With a swift glance the rider took the rolls and tossed them into the flames. The edges blackened, they burned slowly with a yellow flame.

A curse spluttered on Sexton's lips. "Wh—what's the big idea?"

"Blood money, bad luck!" returned Pat laconically. "Next time you prod me, Sexton, I'm a-goin' t' bite!"

- 2 -



URING and dipping, over the rolling swales, dotted with grazing cows, Pat Curran rode toward the Bar-C. "Damn it!" he muttered, feasting his eyes on the long grey adobe and timber ranch house nestling at the foot of a great mesa, "don't seem but yesterday when I rode out."

Consumed by a mounting excitement, Pat spurred the roan into a lope. Through the still air came the steady creak of a lazily-turning windmill, the yippee of a puncher topping off a bronc, the ringing of a hammer in the blacksmith's shop.

Peeling out of leather at the hitch rail in front of the house, he mounted the gallery steps, pushed open the heavy door and stepped into a wide, dimly lighted living room. Gray dust lay thick on the heavy furniture. Gray ashes choked the massive rock fireplace. Like an empty carcase, bereft of life, the house lay quiet and still.

"Anyone around!" yelled Pat. His voice echoed hollowly through the rooms. It was like shouting into an empty drum.

Jingling spurs, crossing the gallery, drew him back to the door. A spare, hatchet-faced man in a faded blue shirt, with patched levis tucked into his scuffed riding boots, stepped briskly toward him. The dry, parchment-like

skin of the newcomer's face and neck were criss-crossed by a myriad wrinkles. A straggling gray moustache covered his tight mouth. Bright and belligerent, his eyes darted over Pat as he approached with quick, jerky strides. Bandy Beeston, ramrod of the Bar-C since Pat was a button had been likened to a rooster. He could peck, too, as many a hard-bitten waddy could resentfully confirm.

"Well, if it ain't Bandy!" ejaculated Pat joyfully. "Howdy, yuh old moss-horn! Kinda lonesome round here!"

"You're tellin' me," snapped the foreman. "Where yuh bin hidin' out? Yore paw cashed in a month back."

"Now, don't pin my ears back," returned Pat good-naturedly. "I've been south of the Rio Grande. Hit lea' er pronto when I saw the notice. Who plugged Pa?"

"Night-Hawks. They bin runnin' th' valley ragged. We wiped out a scad of th' scorpions, but they got th' old man—salivated Ike and Bonesy, too."

"So Pa cleaned up on th' gents?"

"Like hell he did!" growled Beeston. "There's a dozen long-riders poundin' leather fer every jasper we planted. Quito Cats thev calls themselves. Hang out over th' Border thicker'n flies." His voice changed. "We need yuh, Pat. Th' Bar-C's bin fallin' apart sinc't yore Paw cashed in his chips."

THE LISTENER'S lean features sobered at the underlying anxiety in the ramrod's tone. He hunkered down against the gallery wall, rolled a smoke. "Supposin' yuh spread th' hand."

"Yuh kin read it plain." Beeston settled down beside him. "These Quito Cats bin cuttin' out our stuff in hunks. When yore old man checked out, th' boys started t' drift; ain't got more'n a dozen left. Then Sam Yarrow's bin inchin' in. 'Member his sore'd borders us on th' north? An' Ike Ely of th' Terrapin runs more Bar-C calves than Terrapin cows."

"T'put it plain," cut in Pat, "they're tearin' th' Bar-C t' pieces like a pack o' wolves around a dead dogie."

"You said it!" growled the foreman savagely. His sharp eyes dwelt expectantly on his companion's tanned features.

Pat's jaw clamped tight, his dark eyes glinted. "Well, the Bar-C ain't no pot-bellied dogie," he declared, his voice tense. "We'll get us another dozen waddies an' teach these Quito Cats a thing or two. An' if old Yarrow or that Ely coyote figure they can grab our stuff they're due to smell gun-smoke. What d'yuh pay th' boys?"

"Forty an' all found."

"Raise 'em t' sixty 'till we clean up th' range, an' a twenty-dollar gold piece for every dead rustler." A sudden thought struck him. "Who's runnin' th' spread? Any cash?"

"Plenty. Old Judge Walsh is a sorta executor an' he foots th' bills. Yore Paw left forty-fifty thousand in th' Cattleman's Bank. Th' Judge holds th' will too, but he says you an' Larry got t' be there when it's read."

"Say, where's Larry?"

The ramrod hesitated, eyes slanting away. "He hangs out around El Quito," he finally admitted reluctantly. "Busted up with th' old man two summers back."

"That hell hole." A sickening presentiment seized Pat. "He—he don't run with th' Cats?"

"How would I know?" Beeston rose abruptly and moved away. "Larry never would run in harness—he's got a wild streak a mile wide."

"Guess I'll go get him," said Pat decisively. "We need his gun right here."

"Better take a rope!" the foreman flung over his shoulder. "He won't come no other way."

AT SUNUP, Pat hit for the border. South of the Bar-C the terrain spread to the horizon, flat as a frozen ocean. An hour's ride and the grass disappeared, and toward noon the

grey adobes of El Quito shimmered far ahead in the torrid heat waves. Sprawled amid sand and mesquite, five miles over the border, like an ulcer on the face of the desert, the motley collection of shacks and adobes had no excuse for existence save as a rendezvous for renegades, rustlers and other border riff-raff. Here the knife and six-gun were law, and death danced a grisly fandango among the swarthy Mexicans and white desperadoes who frequented its dives.

Eyes alert, Pat loped over the rutted wagon trail that wound through the settlement. He reined up outside a two-story frame structure, the largest building in sight. A battered sign bore the half-obliterated inscription, "*The Good Angel*."

"*Th' Good Angel!*" muttered Pat as he swung out of the leather. "He shore must feel lonely here." He swiftly surveyed his surroundings then pushed open the dusty curtain hanging across the doorway, stepped into the cantina. For a sudden moment he stood still, eyes dazed by the sudden transition from the bright light to the dimly lit interior. Gradually, the room became sharp-focused. A dozen or more Mexicans in gay silk shirts, bright sashes, and tight velvet pants, clustered around the liquor stained tables, smoking and drinking. Several plump, raven-haired senoritas in low-cut evening dresses, the silk showing up whenever they moved too close to a light, were sitting with them.

Covert glances followed his progress across the room to the bar. The sibilant hiss of conversation and the shrill laughter of the girls ceased. An uneasy quiet descended upon the room.

"Larry Curran around?" demanded Pat sharply.

The bardog's eyes brooded upon the stranger. "Who desires to see the Senor Curran?"

"His brother." Suspicion faded from the bardog's dark face. He spoke rap-

idly in Spanish to the nearest man, who strolled across to the stairways, his big spurs tinkling.

A YELL CUT through the mumble of conversation and hit Pat's ears. Descending the stairs three at a time and hitting the floor with a resounding bang, Larry Curran hurried across the room toward his brother, kicking tables and chairs out of his path. "Hello, yuh damned ol' curley wolf! Where yuh bin all my life?" He grabbed Pat's extended hand, pushed him down again in his chair. "Hey, Miguel!" he shouted. "A bottle of red-eye, the best in th' house!"

The brothers were strikingly alike, even to their grey shirts and plain batwing chaps, except that the mouth of the younger man was looser and his voice louder. The observant Pat noticed the pouched skin beneath Larry's reckless eyes, the lingering smell of bad whisky on his breath. He noted, too, two guns thronged low.

Larry filled two glasses brim high from the bottle. "You're a sight fer sore eyes," he chuckled. "Howcome yuh t' drift in?"

"How come yuh t' locate in a hell-hole, with a dandy spread no more'n a day's ride?" countered his brother, eyeing him levelly.

Larry gulped a mouthful. "Hell, who wants t' nurse cows?"

"Yuh know th' old man cashed in?"

"Shore!" There was a tenseness in the other's voice that brought an inquiring gleam to Pat's eyes.

"Know who plugged him?"

"F'r God's sake quit askin' questions," grunted the other irritably. "I pulled outa there more'n two years back!"

"No need t' get riled," answered Pat smoothly. "What yuh doin' with yourself these days?"

"None of yore business!" The grin that accompanied the words took the sting from them.

"Quita Cats?" queried his brother softly, watching the smoke curl from the cigaret between his fingers.

"Yuh hit th' target!" Larry's eyes were challenging.

"You're one hell of a Curran mixin' with that pack!"

The other blushed at the cold contempt in the clipped words. "Guess I kin ride my own trail," he growled.

Pat leaned back in his chair, watching his brother's dissipated features with hard eyes. "How about th' spread?" he asked. "There's four, maybe five thousand cow-critters grazin' in th' Valley. Pa built it up; ain't we got th' guts t' hold it? An' there's forty-fifty thousand dollars in th' bank. That ain't peanuts!"

"Sell, an' split fifty-fifty," Larry said casually.

"It ain't ours t' sell. Judge Walsh in Apache Valley, holds th' will."

"Grab th' blasted cows. There's buyers aplenty on this side of th' border," Larry answered carelessly. "An' t' hell with Judge Walsh."

"You're runnin' off plenty at th' mouth," Pat told him coldly, "but yuh ain't saying a damn thing. I reckon th' will leaves us th' spread. If you want t' pull out, we'll make a dicker, but we got t' see Judge Walsh."

"If'n yuh say so," said Larry indifferently, refilling his glass. "Like yuh say, fifty thousand cart-wheels ain't peanuts."

OUTSIDE the double doors of the Cattlemen's Bank they tied up, ducked under the hitch-rail and sloped up the outside stairway that led to the second floor where Daniel Walsh, "Judge" by courtesy, had his law office.

At their entry the lawyer pivoted round in his swivel chair from his yellowed oak roll-top desk. Like the town of Apache, Dan Walsh had worn well, decided Pat, appraising him with shrewd eyes. The same old bald pate

fringed with white hair, keen blue eyes peering out of a deceptively innocent face.

"Waal, waal, th' prodigal sons," he boomed in a sonorous voice when he saw them. "I'd given yuh both up!" He indicated two straight-backed chairs with a sweep of his hand.

Puffing, he padded across the worn rug in carpet slippers and swung back the door of the big iron safe in the corner of the room. Fumbling inside he withdrew a folded document. It crackled as he opened it and spread it on his desk.

"This here," he announced in measured tones, "is the last will and testament of the late John Curran!"

"Cut th' palavar," cut in Larry, shifting impatiently on his seat. "Give us th' lowdown, pronto!"

"As you wish," the lawyer said, adjusting his glasses. "Here is the gist: In the event of my death I bequeath the Bar-C and all funds on deposit at the Cattlemen's Bank, to my sons Patrick and Larry, either or both, on condition that within six months of my passing, he/they reside on and manage the ranch for one year. At the end of that period, providing he/they prove law abiding citizens, title of the said ranch and all monies shall pass to the said Patrick and/or Larry Curran."

The lawyer peered at the two men over the rims of his glasses. "Thet's about it."

"Seems reasonable t' me," said Pat.

"Who grabs th' works if we pull out?" demanded Larry.

"If neither conforms with th' conditions set forth, each shall receive one dollar lawful currency of the United States, the Bar-C and all animals bearing thet brand shall be sold to the highest bidder, and the net proceeds and all monies are hereby bequeathed to my brother, Michael Curran, formerly of County Clare, Ireland," read Walsh.

"Thet's one hell ef a will," snarled Larry, the veins knotting in his fore-

head. "Ain't we his sons. We got a right to them cows an' th' cash!"

The lawyer shook his head slowly, keen eyes darting from one to the other. "You have no rights except those set out in the will. I suggest, boys, thet you go ahead and run the spread, an' I'll gladly authorize legitimate expenses. You forget, Larry, thet you left the Bar-C—er—against your Father's wishes."

"We need a dozen extra hands," interjected Pat, "an' we gotta pay fightin' wages. Th' night-hawks been running plenty!"

Larry's mouth opened in protest. It closed with a snap. He glared angrily at his brother.

"By all means," agreed Walsh. "I'll back you to the limit."

Pat rose and extended his hand. "Thanks, Judge. I'm stickin'." Eyes stormy, Larry moved impetuously toward the door, slammed it behind him and clattered down the stairway outside.

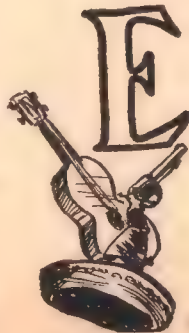
Pat caught up with him as he was forking his pony. "Headin' for th' spread?"

Larry backed his mount, glowering down on his brother's uplifted face. "Nope!" he declared harshly. "Pete Walsh ain't roddin' me. I'm headin' fer th' border."

"Yuh know what that means?" Pat's voice, too, was steely.

"It don't mean nuthin'. I'll grab my share!"

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IGHTEEN good men, reflected Pat Curran with silent satisfaction, as he sat at the end of the long mess table in the Bar-C's cook shack. A week had passed since his talk with "Judge" Walsh, and he had spent the

time preparing his crew for the trouble brewing all around him. Adding to the six men who were out riding range, he still had plenty of men to handle all the trouble the Quito Cats or any other crew might like to try and hand out.

Then Beeston broke the bad news. The wiry, acid-tongued ramrod slid into the seat beside Pat. "Yarrow's moved into Willow Spring!" he announced curtly.

All of a sudden the chatter ceased. Two lines of heads swivelled toward the new boss. Pat looked into eighteen pairs of cool eyes and knew he was being weighed in the balance of their judgment. This was to be his test. The first sign of weakness would damn him and doom the Bar-C.

"Ain't old Yarrow actin' kinda high-handed?" he commented casually. "Bar-C cows watered at that spring since I was a button."

"He figgers th' Bar-C is fallin' apart," commented the waspy foreman, filling his mug with steaming coffee, "an' he's grabbin' while th' grabbin's good."

Pat knew Sam Yarrow of old. Yarrow rodded the big Boxed-W spread to the north. John Curran and the big, blustering Yarrow had pioneered the Valley. From the first there had been rivalry between the two spreads. Guns had roared more than once. In the end, though, the stubborn, tenacious John Curran had won out and corraled the choicest waterholes and the best ranges. Now the old man's strong arm was moved forever; Yarrow was on the rampage.

Pat grinned. "Well, I reckon we'll push Sam back to where he b'long an' boot them nesters off our range." His glance ran up and down the twin row of expectant faces. "How d'yuh fancy th' chore, boys?"

Leathery faces creased into approving grins. "Goddamn!" cracked Pecos, a bony faced old-timer with long moustachios. "It's old John a-talkin'!

It'll shore be a pleasure t' back yore play, boss!"

FROM A SCORCHED hillside, ringed with worn cowpaths, back of Willow Spring, Pat and his ramrod eyed the invaders. Busy as beavers the Boxed-W crew was fencing the water off from Bar-C cows. A chuck wagon was drawn up beside the pools. Half a dozen waddies were digging post holes and running barbed wire in a straight line from the gulch, around the pools on the Bar-C side of the border, down into the valley. A like number of men drifted around, Winchesters in their saddle boots, hazing away thirsty, bellowing bunches of Bar-C critters, doggedly pressing forward to their accustomed watering place. Sam Yarrow's bulky form was plain as he passed among the men directing the stringing of the wire.

Pat's eyes darkened as the bellowing of the thirsty cattle drifted over the heat-scarred hillside.

"Th' doggoned coyote!" he growled. "Looks like his whole damn crew is down there. Let's ride!"

The two men jogged down the slope, broke through the sparse brush at its foot and rode toward the spring.

Eyeing them warily, the Boxed-W riders drifted close. Yarrow dropped a post hole digger and strode toward them, on the far side of the wire. A holstered six-gun slapped against his levis. He was a rangy, big-boned man in his sixties, with thinning hair, eroded features and a jaw like a rock.

"Howdy, Curran" he boomed. "Jest fencin' off my water. Ain't enough fer both spreads."

Pat swung his leg into the ox-bow stirrup. "Well, I reckon yore mind's made up, Sam. so it's no use spillin' words. So-long!"

Beeston darted a sidelong glance at his young boss as they wheeled, and a roar of derisive laughter left Yarrow's throat. A grinning Boxed-W puncher

reined up across Pat's front, compelling him to circle. As he cleared the Box-W pony, Pat swiftly kicked free of the stirrup. His leg shot out and his rowel raked the length of the animal's flank. Galvanized into lightning action by the raking steel, the pony leapt forward, almost dislocating the neck of its grinning rider. Bumping all over the saddle, he strove frantically to bring his bounding, kicking, twisting mount under control.

Pat rode serenely ahead, Beeston tight-lippēd and silent beside him. "That dogblasted lobo shore gave us th' horselaugh," burst out the foreman finally.

"Kinda riles yuh, don't it, Bandy?" chuckled Pat. "Well, Sam won't laugh so loud tomorrow. Listen!" The foreman's thin face creased slowly into a grin as Pat outlined his plan.

Back at the Bar-C Pat hunkered down beside Pecos, Scarface and Wyoming, three of his father's old-time riders. As he gave his orders, he drew a rough diagram in the dirt with his finger.

"...I'm bankin' on you boys t' handle this right," he concluded. "Gather up the cows this side of th' wire, haze them down t' th' flats. I reckon you can gather four-five hundred head. Don't let them Boxed-W rannies git yuh nanny. Let them laugh; it won't be so danged funny after sun-up. Yarrow will figure that you're roundin' up th' critters for a drive t' Antelope Creek or Coyote Spring. Just before sunup, drift them easy toward th' Spring. When yuh hear a shot, lay into them. Is that straight?"

Pecos shifted his chaw and nodded. "We'll pour 'em in, Pat!"

"We'll split th' breeze," said the Bar-C boss rising, "an' don't forget, no trouble! I want them Boxed-W rannies t' sleep sound tonight."

foothills, Pat in the lead. Bunched on the hillside beside Willow Spring, as silent as dark shadows, save for the restless champing of the ponies on their bit-bars, they watched the pool of darkness that was Willow Gulch.

Suddenly the silence was shattered by the harsh clang of an alarm clock, set in an upturned bucket. A soogan-swathed figure beside it stretched out a lazy arm and switched it off. Several of the outstretched forms stirred uneasily.

"Thet's th' cook," breathed Beeston hoarsely. "They'll be movin' pronto." His lean form rigid in the saddle, Pat's attention focused on the scene below. At his foreman's words he turned and swung his arm in a wide circle. The compact bunch of riders broke up, stringing out in a long spaced line. Pat drew his Colt, thumbed back the hammer, pulled the trigger.

Reverberating from hill to hill, the thunder of the report awoke the echoes and transformed the sleeping camp into a hive of activity. The night guard jerked into wakefulness. Holding his bucking pony with one hand, he loosed slugs wildly with the other. Men threw their soogans aside and dashed around, clutching six-guns and Winchesters, vainly searching for the unseen enemy. Yarrow's bull voice reached the silent horsemen on the hillside as he bellowed at the guard.

Then from lower down the gulch came the answering boom of six-guns, the yipping of riders, the deep thunder of a stampeding herd.

Every moment the thunder grew. The growing light revealed a panicky, thirst-crazed stream of cows, madly galloping with clacking horns and up-raised tails, toward the pool beside the camp. The charging, bellowing brutes flooded the gulch, crashing through the brush in an irresistible, blind stampede. On one side they were held by Yarrow's fence; on the other by the steep slope of the gully.

IN THE COLD, grey light of dawn a dozen riders wound through the

The leaders, red-eyed and with tossing horns, were almost on the camp before the hastily awakened Boxed-W crew realized their peril. Some fired ineffectual shots into the packed mass, others waded into the pools struggling toward the wire fence on the far side; more climbed frantically up the steep slope, clinging to squat mesquite and digging in with their toes as they hauled themselves out of the path of the thundering herd.

The stampede hit the camp. A thousand cloven hooves trampled bedrolls, tarps, guns, cooking utensils, tools into the dirt. With a crash the chuck wagon overturned, spilling flour, sugar, beans, coffee over the ground. Through the dust-shrouded confusion the scream of a man in mortal agony cut like the edge of a jagged knife.

IN THREE minutes it was all over. Hundreds of Bar-C steers stood hock-deep in the pools, contentedly sucking the coveted water. Nothing remained of the Yarrow camp except a wrecked wagon, one upturned wheel spinning slowly, and fragments of torn soogans.

Dripping wet, the shivering Boxed-W waddies who painfully straddled the fence faced Bar-C guns. Pat, at the head of the remainder of his riders, circled, cut the fence and pounded into the smashed camp behind the three Bar-C punchers who had stampeded the thirsty herd. Sheepish Boxed-W riders dropped down from the slopes and broke out of the thick brush back of the spring to confront the levelled barrels of a dozen Winchesters. The shapeless body of the laggard lay, crushed beyond recognition by the overturned wagon.

Yarrow, roaring like an enraged mountain lion, emerged from a nest of rocks. "Goddamn it, Curran," he raged. "I'll plug yuh fer this!"

"You asked for it!" returned Pat. "Get his gun, Wyoming."

Yarrow's hand instinctively went to his holster. He crouched, fingers closing on the butt of his iron.

"Pull that gun," Pat snarled, his Winchester slanting down, "an' I'll bore yuh, so help me. Stretch!" The deadly menace in his quiet tones checked the cowman's hand. Slowly, his arms crept up.

Ten Boxed-W riders were herded into a sullen, silent group. One was dead. The night-guard had disappeared. Covering their prisoners, the Bar-C waddies made a rough circle around them. Two of Pat's crew were rounding up the Boxed-W ponies, many of which were scarred and bleeding from contact with sharp horns.

"Get yore boys busy. I want that wire cut an' rolled," ordered Pat, reining up beside Yarrow.

"I'll see yuh in hell afore I touch thet fence!" grated the cowman, heavy jaw set.

"Suits me," shrugged Pat indifferently. "If we do th' work, you jaspers walk home!"

"Saay, mister, it's sixteen miles 't' th' spread!" ejaculated a lantern-jawed Boxed-W waddy.

"Then cut wire," shot back the Bar-C boss.

Feet shuffled uneasily, but not a man stepped forward.

Two hours passed before the Bar-C boys finished clipping wire and coiling it around the fence posts. Circled by two alert riders, Sam Yarrow's men stood frying in the sun, or hunkered disconsolately, watching the Bar-C boys splashing into the pools.

The job done, half a dozen of Pat's punchers hit out for the home spread, Boxed-W ponies in the lead.

Pat rode up to Yarrow and his crew. "Hit th' trail, boys. Yore ponies'll be home, tomorrow."

"An' if'n we don't?" demanded the truculent old cowman.

"Would yuh fancy another stampede?" answered Pat with a thin smile.

A ragged column of cursing riders, walking awkwardly in high-heeled riding boots, straggled down the gulch and streamed out upon the sun-baked flat.

"Goddamn, Pat," cackled Beeston as the little cavalcade jingled southward. "Yore paw ain't got nuthin' on yuh, an' he never missed a bet. I gamble that Sam Yarrow won't string fence agin in a hurry!"

Pat grunted. His thoughts were elsewhere. "What was that you said about nesters?"

"Two families located on Antelope Creek."

Pat swung west, toward the rolling foothills. "Might just as well chase all th' lobos off'n Bar-C range. Let's go get them, Bandy. You boys head back for th' spread."

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A MILE ALONG the creek stood a sturdy, two-room log cabin built years before by a prospector as a base camp for trips into the barren Tortulas. Its notched logs were as solid as the day they were peeled and wedged into place. Bottles set in clay formed the windows. Inside were bunks and rough, hand-made furniture. The cabin was used as a line camp by Bar-C riders. A pole corral was built in the rear.

Squawking hens scattered as the Bar-C men moved up. A girl came quickly to the door. Unabashed, she surveyed the visitors with calm curiosity.

"Won't you come in?" The invitation was extended with a smile.

She was slim, trim-figured and wore a neat calico dress. About his own age, he judged. Raven black, her hair was

smoothly brushed and gathered in a knot at the back of her small, proudly-poised head. Her features were well formed, but her beauty lay in the repose, the steadfastness of her hazel eyes and the sweetness of her ready smile.

Pat glanced appealingly at Bandy, but the wily old foreman had dismounted, and, his back to Pat, was busily engaged in tightening a cinch-strap. Pat cleared his throat. "I guess not, ma'am. This here's Bar-C range."

"Is it?" Her voice, quiet but distinct, reflected polite interest. "I thought we were worlds from anybody."

"We don't abide nesters on Bar-C range. Reckon you better pack."

"But it's so lovely here," she protested. "And Dad's crippled!"

"Yeah!"

A faint flush spread over her cheeks at the derision in the flat, clipped exclamation. "If you'll step inside," she invited coldly, "you can see for yourself."

PAT SWUNG out of leather and shouldered past her into the cabin, Beeston at his heels. The foreman whistled softly as he glanced around. The room into which they had stepped was used as a kitchen. Dainty green and white curtains fringed the windows. Spotless oilcloth covered the table.

Pat unceremoniously stepped into the next room. The scorn in the girl's eyes irked him, he choked down a rising anger at the situation in which he found himself.

The bedroom was divided in half by an Indian blanket hung from the pole ceiling. In the bunk lay a bearded man in his fifties with gaunt, lined features. His eyes were dull and sunken, his high forehead wrinkled.

Pat swung round.

"How long before you can move him?"

Slender fingers intertwined. She

gazed in perplexity at the wounded man. "I really don't know." She hesitated. "Maybe a week or two."

"He can lie on a wagon bed," Pat's voice was hard. "I'll give yuh a couple of days to clear out."

Behind him, Bandy Beeston sniffed and eyed the fresh pies hungrily as they jingled through the kitchen.

"Would you like a slice?" asked the girl, a smile erasing the anxious lines that fretted her smooth forehead.

"Dammit, ma'am, there ain't nuthin' better than a hunk o' homemade pie. I shore would! Hey, Pat, did yuh hear th' lady?" But Pat swung morosely ahead, heading for his pony.

TWO DAYS later, Pat saddled up and again rode toward Antelope Creek. Despite his scorn at Bandy's alleged soft-heartedness, thoughts of the nester girl and her crippled father had plagued him. In the past, the Bar-C boys had enjoyed little contact with women. The voluptuous, silk-stockinged, hard-drinking type that frequented border dance halls and cantinas had only aroused a feeling of repugnance.

Contact with May Hilton had disturbed him to the depths. As he hit westward he cursed himself for a soft-hearted fool. The girl and her father were nesters. They were intruders on Bar-C range. If he allowed them to remain, news would travel fast, and he would soon have a flood of noverty-stricken, thieving hoemen on Antelope Creek. Get rid of them, and forget her, urged reason. That's what his Pa would have done and that's what he should do. Angrily he jabbed the rowels into the roan and the startled animal snorted and broke into a furious gallop.

Still debating inwardly he reached the edge of the pasture—a clean-limbed pony, sweat-streaked, stood ground hitched outside the cabin.

Curious, he drifted close, swung out

of the saddle, eyed the brand—an arrow. Ed. Small rodded the Arrow outfit on the upper end of the valley, and bred blooded horses. This was one of the best.

"Take your hands off me!" May Hilton's contemptuous voice rang out inside the cabin. Startled, Pat swung swiftly around.

A man's deep voice, the crash of a falling chair, a muffled scream. Again, a man's voice, throaty with passion. "I'll tame yuh, yuh little wildcat!"

Three swift strides and Pat was through the doorway. He recoiled with quick amazement. May Hilton, dress torn from one white shoulder, was struggling desperately in the arms of Larry. His brother's unshaven face was pressed close against the girl's pulsing neck. Her left arm was pinned down. Her right fingers, crooked, raked her assailant's tan cheek. Blood dripped from his lacerated flesh as he vainly tried to grab her free arm.

Wild with terror, the struggling girl's eyes met Pat's with a desperate, wild appeal.

"Lay off, Larry!" Pat's voice was hoarse, he quivered with a strange, savage emotion.

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T PAT'S terse challenge, his brother's tense grip on the struggling girl reluctantly relaxed. Eyes glaring, he swung round and faced the intruder. "Git outa here!" he grated. "This is my gal!"

"I'm not your girl, you beast!" panted May Hilton. She shrank away, pulling her torn dress into place. "Men respect women—in Kansas."

"And in Arizona!" Muscles taut, eyes hard, Pat approached his brother.

"Get out!" He spat the words contemptuously. Larry's reply was a snarl. His right hand slapped his gun butt. Before the weapon cleared leather, Pat's fist swung to the side of his jaw. He staggered sideways from the impact of the blow. Pat grabbed his gun wrist, twisted. The iron flew out of his hand, thudded on the floor. Pat stepped back, booted it beneath the table.

Spitting out teeth, Larry balanced on the balls of his feet, watching his brother with the ferocity of a cornered lobo. Without warning, he lowered his head, bored in, fists flailing. Penned in by the narrow room, Pat had no room in which to sidestep. Feet apart, crouched, he met the onslaught head on, bunched fists pounding Larry's gray-shirted middle. A hard first, a fist like hammered rawhide, pounded into his left eye.

Flattened against the wall behind the stove, the girl, her fear forgotten, watched with fascinated eyes.

Pat's body quivered under the impact of his brother's hammering, but he felt no pain. Every blow stoked the fire of his consuming rage. Blindly, remorselessly, he hunched his shoulders and fought back with silent ferocity, thrilled with bitter joy as he felt Larry's body quake beneath his slogging onslaught.

Flesh and blood couldn't withstand that whirlwind pace—long. Suddenly Pat realized that his brother was weakening. Larry gulped air in sobbing gasps, his thudding fists were slowing, he swayed drunkenly. Pat stepped in, swinging vicious uppercuts at the reeling rider's sagging jaw. Battered by the tornado of blows, Larry finally sank down in an exhausted, bloodied heap. Desperately he strove to rise on wobbly legs. His torn mouth and smashed nose streamed scarlet. He swayed upright—a relentless right took him under the ear. With a groan he collapsed and sprawled helplessly on

the beaten earth floor, his labored breathing a gurgling sob.

Pat stood over the limp figure, chest rising and falling spasmodically as he sucked air into his heaving lungs. One eye was blackened, his nose gushed red, his shirt was splattered with blood.

Painfully, Larry hauled himself to his feet. Without a word he staggered past his brother's vengeful form, passed out of the cabin into the brilliant sunlight. Pat heard the rattle of the bridle, the tattoo of the galloping pony's hooves...and he was suddenly tired.

LEANING his aching body against the timbered wall, he wiped the blood from his bruised lips—firm fingers grasped his arm and led him to a chair. May Hilton's voice, now cool and competent, made music in his ringing ears. "Sit down and rest. You were wonderful!" He felt foolishly, strangely happy.

The girl bathed his face and neck with cool creek water, wrung out the cloth and bandaged it over his blackened eye. Her father's querulous voice called from the next room. She hurried away. When she returned the torn dress was replaced by a simple white blouse, fastened with a plain gold brooch at the neck. Her dark hair was again smooth and sleek.

"How's the warrior?" she smiled.

Pat's features twisted into a painful grin. "Guess I can sit up an' take nourishment."

"Could you eat a slice of pie?" Amusement danced maliciously in her hazel eyes.

"Just try me!" he challenged. She bustled around the little kitchen, humming cheerfully, set a plate and a slab of pie before him, placed a coffee-pot upon the stove and fed in kindling.

"That's my brother, Larry," Pat volunteered ruefully. "Reckon he's kinda wild. First time he's bothered yuh?"

"He stopped in several times," she

answered, "but he never manhandled me, the brute!"

"Got a gun?"

"A derringer in my trunk. I'll certainly carry it from now on." She poured his coffee.

Pat cleared his throat, hesitated. "You can keep this cabin if yuh fancy it," he said, striving to keep his voice casual. "Reckon I'll have one of th' boys drop in now and again."

"Perhaps you could look in occasionally," she replied softly. He glanced up quickly, but she had turned to the stove.

"Maybe." His voice was guarded. "Well, reckon I'll mosey along."

Beyond the cabin the creek trail cut through a stand of scrub oak. A small spring muddied the earth. Heading homeward Pat noted fresh tracks of a galloping horse plainly imprinted in the soggy earth, the fore feet winged out. Larry, he commented mentally, thet bronc shore paddles.

At noon he rode into the spread. Bandy crossed the yard as he slipped the bridle off the roan and led it to water. The old foreman jerked to a stop as he glimpsed Pat's bloodied shirt and blackened eye.

"Yuh look like yuh tangled with a wildcat," he grunted. "Say, didn't yuh ride fer Antelope Creek?"

Pat nodded shortly. "Larry marked me up!"

"Th' hell he did," Bandy perked up. "He ain't sparkin' thet gal up there?"

"Ain't he?" returned Pat in disgust. He told of the morning's fracas.

"Th' mangy coyote!" growled Bandy.

Hooves drummed on the hard-packed earth. A pony dashed into the yard behind them and slid to a stop in a cloud of dust.

The heads of both men swivelled. "Stella Yarrow!" ejaculated Bandy.

clad in a mannish plaid shirt, worn riding breeches and soft high leather boots. A dark red bandanna matched the bronze ringlets of her head, tucked beneath a grey Stetson. Her handsome tanned face was hard set. A .38 was holstered around her slim waist.

As she strode impulsively toward them, eyes flashing with anger, Stella Yarrow made a striking picture. "Best lookin' gal in th' Valley," an amorous puncher had once declared, "but show me th' puncher what kin rope her!"

"So you shot him in th' back, you low-down skunk!" Laced with contempt, the accusing words whipped from her tight lips. She stopped at the corral rail and gazed wrathfully at the two men.

"Shot who—where—Miss Stella?" spluttered Bandy.

"My Dad; this sidewinder knows where!" Her blazing eyes were focused full on Pat.

The two astonished men looked at each other. "F'r gosh sakes let's git this straight, Miss Stella," implored the foreman. "Where was Sam shot?"

"His body was found this morning in a gulch below Willow Spring," she replied stonily. "Some 'cur dry-gulched him." Her voice broke away from its strained composure, rose to a hysterical scream. "He had no enemy except you; you drove our crew away from the spring and killed poor Limpy. You threatened Dad, but you didn't have the spunk to shoot it out with him." Breast rising and falling, she pointed at the Bar-C boss. Paralyzed by the vehemence of her emotion and the shock of the accusation, he stood speechless.

Spasmodically, the agitated girl gripped the butt of her gun swinging at her side. With practiced skill she thumbed back the hammer as the weapon came up. The bewildered Pat made no move, but Bandy's wiry arm shot out, knocked up her hand as the gun roared. The slug whined into the

A GIRL THREW herself off the blowing, lathered pony. She was

blue. Swiftly, the foreman grabbed the upraised wrist. A brief struggle and he twisted the weapon out of the girl's clenched fist and thrust it into his waistband.

"Yore crazy!" he snapped. "Pat didn't blast Sam. He's bin down at Antelope Creek all mornin'."

Pat spoke for the first time. "You're shore barkin' up the wrong tree, Stella. I'm no bushwhacker. What if Sam an' me did have an argument?"

"You can't fool me," she retorted heatedly, hands clenching and unclenching in the intensity of her emotion. "You'll swing for this, Patrick Curran!" Abruptly turning, she went for her pony with quick, jerky steps, swung into leather and pounded away.

Bandy heaved a deep sigh of relief. "What d'yuh make ef th' mess?"

Pat ran his fingers through his hair in perplexity. "It beats me. Can't blame Stella for goin' on th' prod, but why pick on me?" He jerked his head toward the corral. "Tom's a first-rate tracker. Maybe he can pick up some sign. Let's hit for th' Spring."

THE SUN was dropping toward the west when the three men rode up the gulch in the tracks of the thirst crazed herd that had flattened the Boxed-W camp a few days before. Among the jack pines two ponies, a flea-bitten grey and a big sorrel, were tethered.

"Hank's around," growled Bandy. "Guess Sam must've been plugged hereabouts."

Suddenly, Sheriff Hank Taylor's sharp voice hailed them from beyond the chaparral. "Stay hitched you jaspers. We're casting around f'r signs."

Pat finished a cigaret before the Sheriff, followed by his deputy, broke through the brush and tramped toward them.

"Git a line on th' varmint what downed Sam?" inquired Bandy, as they hunched around the Sheriff.

"Nope," said Taylor. His eyes probed Pat. "Stella claims it was a neighbor."

"Meanin' me," returned Pat tightly. "I was on Antelope Creek when he was plugged, Hank."

"How d'yuh know when he was plugged?" drawled Taylor.

"Stella claims after sunup."

"Ride alone t' Antelope Creek?"

"Yep. Called on some nesters. Hilton by name."

"Yuh had a little trouble with Sam?"

Taylor nodded toward the fence posts still standing with the wire coiled around them.

"Sam moved in an' we booted him off," said Pat tensely.

"Reckon he didn't take t' it kindly," commented the Sheriff. "Mebbe he threatened t' smoke yuh up,"

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "That don't mean nuthin'. Th' two spreads been feudin' since I was a button."

Taylor nodded, fumbled for his makings. "Got a smoke?"

Rolling a smoke from Pat's tobacco he sauntered toward the Bar-C ponies. "Nice piece of horseflesh, Pat," he commented, eyeing the roan, "I gamble he's a stepper."

"They don't come better," said Pat. "Where did they find Sam?"

"Right where yore standin'. Th' slug took him from th' rear under th' left shoulder. Guess th' bushwhacker stalked him from th' brush." Taylor pointed across the gulch.

"Can Tom take a look see? He reads signs like an Apache."

"Go ahead," invited Taylor. "We been nosin' around a mite ourselves."

Pat turned to the breed who stood impassively by, opaque black eyes expressionless above high cheekbones. The pair crossed the gulch, threaded through the manzanita and sharp-thorned cat's claw. "Look for th' hoss," directed Pat. "He musta tied up somewhere around."

The breed nodded. "Me find um!"

Slowly, like a hound on the trail, with bent head, he began to cast around in a wide circle. Pat returned to the group under the pines.

Finally the breed reappeared, swinging toward them with long strides. Pat straightened eagerly. "Any luck?"

"Shore me find um. Tie pony to jack pine. Smoke two, three cigarets. Pony paddles like this." The breed turned out the toes of his riding boots. "Gallop down gulch in one big hurry." He nodded toward the Sheriff. "He find um too."

"So that's why yuh was admirin' th' roan," commented Pat ironically, to the silent Taylor. "Well, he ain't a paddler." Like a bolt from the blue, recollection of the tracks of Larry's pony hit him. In his mind's eye he saw the hoof prints, plainly impressed in the mud beside Antelope Creek, slowly filling with water. Was he the assassin? Larry would have had time aplenty to cut down Sam Yarrow and circle to Antelope Creek before dropping down to El Quito. Maybe his call at the cabin was a crude attempt to establish an alibi, if one should be needed.

"What's on your mind, Curran?" There was curiosity in the Sheriff's drawling tones.

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AT KNEW the Sheriff of old. Hank Taylor was a shrewd and relentless lawman. Once let him sniff a clue and no hound dog would be more persistent in ferreting out the truth.

"I got plenty on my mind, Hank. I was tryin' t' figure out who rode that hoss."

A pony snorted around a bend in the gulch and diverted Taylor's attention. The nodding head of a walking horse appeared, Pat saw the rider was a tall,

dark-featured man in puncher's togs. He sat easily on the saddle leading a pack pony. Its bulging load was topped by pick and shovel and secured by a neat diamond hitch.

"Sexton!" breathed the Bar-C boss as the rider drew abreast of the bunch and reined in.

"Howdy gents!" he hailed. His penetrating eyes ran over the group and came to rest on the star pinned to Taylor's unbuttoned vest. "Trouble?"

Pat told him what had happened. "How came yuh t' be ridin' this way?" he concluded.

"Headin' fer Willow Spring," drawled Sexton, hauling a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket. "Figger on driftin' around th' hills." He rolled a brown papered quiry.

Casually the Sheriff walked up to the standing horse. "Guess I ain't made yore acquaintance. Hang out around here?" As he spoke his eyes probed Sexton's outfit.

"I jest mosey around the Tortulas. Mebbe I'll strike it rich some day. Who knows?"

"Thet shovel ain't seen much use." There was a pointed question in Taylor's casual comment.

"Jest bought it in El Quito," Sexton replied blandly. "Lost th' old one last week. Reckon it slipped th' lashin'."

The Sheriff nodded, fished a pack of papers from his vest pocket, slapped his pants. "Dammit, I forgot th' makin's."

"Try mine." Sexton tossed down his sack of tobacco.

Taylor carefully shook a little into a paper. The breed caught Pat's eye. Almost imperceptibly he nodded toward the fore feet of the rangy claybank.

Pat drifted close, eyed the pony's tracks. "Say," he asked loudly. "What kind of papers did that lead-pusher use?"

"Brown paper," grunted the breed.

Pat swung round toward the Sheriff. "This gent forks a paddler an' makes brown paper quirlies. Mebbe he got a fouled Winchester he ain't cleaned yet."

Sexton's features creased. He shook with silent laughter. "Yuh ain't a-tryin' t' pin this killin' on me, are yuh, Curran?" he mocked. "I got a dozen witnesses to prove I rode outa El Quito at sunup, an' this critter ain't got wings." He kneed the claybank. "Waal, so long, gents. I'll be around ef yuh want me." Four pairs of eyes watched the retreating back.

Sheriff Taylor turned to his massive deputy. "Mosey down t' El Quito an' check on that gent. Guess I'll hit fer th' Boxed-W."

ON HIS WAY back to the Bar-C Pat pondered on the tie-up between the killing and Larry. Larry rode a paddler and he smoked brown paper quirlies. It looked bad. It looked worse in a second when Tom, the breed, rode silently up behind them.

"That Sexton, he no kill Yarrow."

Bandy snorted. "He's ridin' th' killer's hoss, ain't he?"

The breed shrugged his shoulders. "Mebbeso, but the killer he smoke black tobacco; this man smoke brown."

Hank Taylor knew that too, thought Pat drearily.

When they rode into the Bar-C, Pecos broke away from a group of riders and strolled over to them. "Heard th' latest, boss?"

Pat grinned at the suppressed excitement reflected in the old-timer's wrinkled features. "Spit it out or you'll bust!"

"Ike Ely's moved into Coyote Spring with a bunch of greasers!"

"Th' hell he did!" ejaculated the Bar-C boss.

Ely rodded the Terrapin, a small spread that lay due east on the Apache river. Pat remembered him from years past as a swarthy, shift-eyed half

breed, with a sod shack, tumble-down barns and three or four ragged vaqueros. Ely's calf crop had often roused the suspicions of the grim old owner of the Bar-C, but he never got the deadwood on Ike. Coyote Spring lay halfway between the two spreads and had always been recognized as Bar-C water.

"Looks like he figgers this spread's fallin' apart an' he's grabbin' his, like Sam," growled Bandy. "He's bin waitin' fer this chance fer twenty years."

"Guess we'll say 'Howdy' about sun-up," grated Pat, "an' we'll need a dozen good men with Winchesters."

"I'll rope them right now," stormed the ramrod. "I shore hate that breed's guts."

A GREAT white moon flooded the silent valley, its light outlined a compact bunch of riders jogging through the sage. Steadily the cavalcade angled across the flats, fourteen tight-lipped men hunched in their saddles.

Abruptly the silence was shattered by the report of a rifle. From beside a huge fragment of rock near the trail stepped a vaquero, shapeless in a hanging tilma, features shaded by a wide-brimmed sombrero. Both hands clutched the smoking Winchester with which he had fired the warning shot. Pat raised his hand high in a gesture of peace.

"Ike Ely around?" he yelled.

The Mexican jerked his head toward the spring. His sullen eyes surveyed the two riders sourly as they jingled past. Threading through the brush, Pat and his foreman rode into a clearing about an acre in extent. On its far side water welled into a rock-bound basin. Beside the spring stood the unfinished framework of a shack. A chuck wagon was drawn up beside it. Nearby a fire blazed, around which clustered a half dozen frowsy vaqueros. More were washing and drinking at the spring. About twenty in all, figured Pat. Blankets and bed rolls dot-

ted the clearing. Saddle horses grazed in the chaparral.

The visitors rode straight across toward the fire, riding roughshod over blankets and bedding. A big, swarthy man, his head crowned by a tangled mop of greasy hair, broke away from the staring group around the fire and advanced to meet them. He had a thin slit of a mouth and beady eyes.

"What yuh want?" he demanded sullenly, eyes glancing from one to the other.

"Guess I want you, Ely; this is Bar-C water!"

Ely showed yellow teeth in a snarl. "Not no more it ain't. I took over!"

"Apache river run dry?"

"I'm spreadin' out. Need more water. Th' Bar-C ain't pennin' us in no more!"

"Yuh gotta hell ef a gall, yuh god-damned brand blotcher," broke in Bandy hotly.

Ely's unshaven features mottled with quick anger. He shouted over his shoulder to the vaqueros behind him. They streamed toward the two Bar-C riders, surrounded them like ill-omened birds of prey. Pat's alert eyes caught the flash of threatening knives, the muzzles of guns. His pony developed the jitters, bucking and pitching. The scowling circle broke, as the roan lashed out viciously with its shod hooves. Finally, he steadied the animal, walked it close to Ike Ely's ill-kept figure. His tone changed.

"So you're grabbin' th' spring? Why, yuh blasted snake, you ain't got th' guts t' grab a baby's rattle!"

"Ain't I?" Ely's hand flew to his holster... a dozen rifles cracked from the slopes that frowned down upon them. Lead whistled and whined across the clearing. Ely's jaw dropped in surprise, fear showed in his slitted eyes.

"Now yuh listen t' me!" Pat whirled to face the chagrined breed. "I got plenty men holed up around here. Split th' breeze; get out and stay out, or

we'll butcher every damned coyote in yore outfit. That goes for you, too!"

In desperation, Ely stared around at the silent slopes that had spewed the hail of lead. His eyes came back to Pat's lean features. His mouth twitched. "I'll git yuh f'r this, Curran," he grated.

"Cut th' palaver and hit leather!" reported Pat harshly. "Lead-throwing starts, pronto!"

The breed swung slowly on his heel. "I'll pull out," he said at last. "Gotta hitch up th' wagon."

"You'll hitch up nothin'. Vamoose or you'll go out feet first!"

Ten minutes later Pat watched a disorderly array of dusky riders pound down the gully, urging their ponies with steel and quirt. From the slopes around the spring descended the Bar-C crew, yipping and shouting. They gathered around the grinning Bandy and the tight-lipped Pat.

"First thing we do," directed the latter, pointing to the bedrolls and the unfinished shack, "is build a swell fire. You can burn up the shack too." He turned to Bandy. "Reckon we're through with Ike."

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WEEK HAD passed since Ike Ely had been dislodged from Coyote Spring, and all was quiet at the Bar-C. Too quiet, Pat figured. It was like the calm before a storm.

Bandy entered the room and for awhile the two men puffed their quirlies and discussed the night hawks. Suddenly a puncher stuck his head around the door jamb. "Gal jest breezed in, boss, forkin' Stumpy's grey."

Pat jumped toward the door. "I knew it!" he growled. "That's May

Hilton. Stumpy was covering Antelope Creek. There's trouble!"

Hatless and attired in a grey shirt and faded overalls, May Hilton stood beside a blowing pony. Her dark hair was wind-blown, her eyes shadowed. Pat almost ran down the steps.

"Stumpy in trouble?"

"He's dead!" she replied quietly.

"How come?" Pat's voice was tense.

"A large party of Mexicans and Americanos rode up the valley just before sunrise. I heard shots soon after they passed and I ran up the creek. I saw this pony, standing by a man lying on the ground. It was your rider, dead." Her voice faltered. "The poor man's body was too heavy for me to lift. So I mounted the pony and rode here as fast as I could."

"Yuh shore he's dead?" inquired Pat gently.

She shuddered. "His head was almost shot away and the flies—oh, it was horrible!"

"It's them blasted Quito Cats," jerked out Bandy. "Let's go git them!"

"With what?" demanded Pat. "There ain't no more'n six waddies around the spread. An' why are the Cats hidin' up th' valley by day?"

He turned to the puncher who had followed him out. "You take a hoss and go an' fetch Stumpy. Miss Hilton can ride with yuh."

PAT AND his foreman watched the girl ride off, the lanky puncher beside her. Then while the foreman roused the sleeping night crew and sped them on their way to round up the day crew, Pat hunkered by the water trough and thought things over. How come a night-hawk bunch were slinking around the valley at sunup? There was only one answer—to haze Boxed-W and maybe Arrow stock. They'd hole up in the barrens under the shadow of the Tortulas through the daylight hours, then sweep down the valley when darkness fell, driving

everything before them, hell bent for the border. They probably figured that Boxed-W range was wide open now that Yarrow was dead. They had blasted poor Stumpy to keep his mouth shut.

Pat's lips pursed as he perceived a flaw in his reasoning. They must haze their spoils across the Bar-C range and they were too slick to imagine that they could push a rustled herd through twenty well-armed men.

Then the solution hit him like a bullet. There was only one answer. Come nightfall they would toll his crew away, and pen them up in some way, until the stolen stock was safe from pursuit or over the border. How?

Well, he thought, he'd know before another day dawned. Maybe he'd learn soon enough to strike back.

THROUGHOUT the day the scattered Bar-C riders loped or galloped in on sweaty, blowing ponies. Two had been left out on the range. Hours later, one of these two came through the cottonwoods, bent over his pony's neck, coaxing the last ounce of speed from the blowing animal.

Reining his mount to sliding stop in the yard, he tumbled out of the kak and dashed toward the lighted cookshack. Breathing hard, he almost collided with the silent Pat. It was a freckled, sandy-haired young puncher named Jonesy.

"Then lousy hooters are bunchin' our beef across Willow Spring!" he gasped.

"How many?" shot back Pat.

"Mebbe six or eight. Mac's keepin' cases on th' galoots. They're pushin' th' critters south."

Pat almost yelled in his relief. The Quito Cats had tipped their hand. They figured he would rush his crew back into the foothills to save the threatened cows and leave the way clear for the main drive down the valley. At last the long hours of indeci-

sion were over. Now he could play his cards.

Bandy heard the news next and came over to Pat. "Guess we hit fer Willow Spring, pronto, eh?"

"Just achin' t' throw lead, ain't yuh, yuh old war hoss!" grinned Pat. "Well, you can ride t' Willow Spring, but yuh can't take more'n three men!"

Bandy's jaw dropped. "Three—men!" he exclaimed. "How about you—an' the crew?"

"We'll be busy," promised Pat grimly. Perplexity still lingered on the foreman's features. Slowly it appeared as Pat outlined his plan. "Those jaspers up at Willow Spring will just go through th' motions, but they won't fight," he concluded; "they're bell-wethers t' toll us away."

"Yuh need a good sidekick, Pat, lemme stick around!"

"You hit for th' spring," retorted Pat. His tone was good natured but it held a finality that checked the foreman's quick protest. "We've got to keep them busy up there, and I can't spare more'n two-three men."

VEILED by banking clouds, the moon peered wanly over the valley as Pat led a dozen riders across the flats. Silence brooded over the range. Every half-mile a man dropped out, wheeled up the valley and stopped. Pat was stringing a cordon of guards across the valley to give warning of the approach of the rustled herd. The Bar-C boss was determined to take no chances of the Quito Cats slipping through.

The last man wheeled and jogged off. Pat turned and jogged back trail, checking upon the far-flung line of silent sentries hunched in their saddles, ears straining to catch the distant thunder of a moving herd.

Three times he spanned the chain of riders. The hours dragged and the valley slept. Still, there was no sign of the night hawks.

Distant rifle shots crackled in the foothills and again brought torturing doubts to Pat's mind. Reining up midway between two of the guards, his anxious eyes swept the empty plains. Were Bandy and his men making a desperate stand while he and a dozen well-armed waddies loafed through the night awaiting a phantom foe?

The roan's ears twitched. Pat craned his head forward, listening intently, but could hear nothing more than the blood surging through his ear drums.

He slid out of leather, pressed his ear against the hard earth. His pulse leapt—deep, unmistakable, came the vibrations of a thousand pounding hooves. A herd was heading down the valley.

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WITH THE thunder of the herd still ringing in his ears, Pat jumped to his feet, swung into the saddle.

At a trot, he led his riders eastward, angling toward the source of the sound. The thunder grew.

Ahead a moving mass, like a giant shadow, darkened the moonlit plain.

Pat turned in the saddle and met the gleaming eyes of his tensed waddies. "Turn 'em boys," he yelled above the din. "And shoot t' kill!"

He reached the torrent of moving cows, neck reined the roan to the right, skirting the flank of the herd, pulling ahead toward the leaders.

Guns crashed in the rear. A vaquero loomed out of the night. He ducked as a gun spurted scarlet and the night swallowed his assailant before he could check his blowing mount. On his left, the stampeding cows were thinning. Blinded by swirling dust, he gave the roan its head and streaked across the

face of the herd, firing into the air and endeavoring to push the laboring beasts into a circle. The ragged array of menacing horns was behind him now.

Suddenly he saw that the moon, formerly dead ahead, was now to his right. He yelled in triumph—the herd was turning. A bullet pinged against his saddle horn and ricocheted away into the night. Swinging around he saw two riders charging at him from the rear. Hastily he plugged the empties from his Colt and reloaded.

Again a gun lanced red and he felt the quick burn of a bullet across his shoulder. He pulled away from the herd, threw down on the nearest rider, not a dozen paces behind him, and triggered. The man sagged forward, grabbed the horn, his body swaying as his plunging pony cut off across the flat. His companion spurred at Pat, his bared teeth white against his swarthy features. His gun flashed as Pat wheeled toward him. Shirt scorched by the powder flash, the Bar-C boss thumbed his hammers. The onrushing pony drove into the ground, turned a perfect somersault, and struggled up on its forefeet. The rider lay prone. That was all Pat saw from the saddle of his galloping pony as the onrushing cows surged over horse and man in a mighty torrent.

As they circled, the speed of the blowing, bellowing cows gradually slackened. Soon they were moving at a trot, dropped to a walk. Finally, the weary, footsore beasts drifted to a halt.

Pat rode around the herd. The night hawks had disappeared. One by one he tallied his men. Four were missing. In the moonlight he walked his lathered pony back along the path of the stampede.

A pony whinnied, standing with trailed reins beside the figure of a man sprawled in the trampled sage. As Pat rode up, the rider staggered dazedly to his feet and gazed vacantly around. His

gaze focused on the approaching horseman and his right hand slapped leather, to bunch in impotent anger—the holster was empty.

"Stretch fella!" snapped Pat. The rider flung long dishevelled hair back from his forehead and raised reluctant hands shoulder high. Blood trickled from a deep cut in his cheek.

"Larry!" gasped his brother.

Sullen faced, the other stood with tight-locked lips.

"Yuh hurt bad?" Pat rode close.

"Slug scratched me. Ain't nuthin'. I'm shore played outa luck." Larry's voice was hoarse with disgust.

PAT'S TAUT features gave no sign of the conflict that raged within him. The unwritten law of the range decreed one stark penalty for rustling—the rope.

Memories of happier days, ties of blood, fought against the demands of grim border justice.

"Gawd! Quit starin' at me like I was a spook. Guess I'm due to figger in a neck-tie party, unless..." he nodded toward his pony, and his eyes searched the moonlit flats. A curse that was almost a groan left his lips. Not fifty yards away three riders were jogging toward them.

"Hey boss!" yelled one of the exuberant waddies. "We got one of th' sidewinders!" They reined up. Pat saw the wrists of the man in the center were lashed to the horn. He was sharp featured with a sweeping black moustache. His wide mouth quirked humorously as he met Pat's scrutiny.

"Waal, Larry!" he drawled. "I guess we'll make right good buzzard bait. May them lousy greasers fry in hell! We coulda pushed that herd through ef they'd stuck."

"Bring them along," cut in Pat curtly. He wheeled back toward the herd.

A warning shout from a waddy

guarding the herd drifted across the sage to the group around the fire. He was standing in his stirrups, arm extended, pointing up the valley. Spur chains tinkled and leather creaked as Bar-C hombres made a concerted rush for their horses and hit leather—a body of riders, their ponies stretched out in a mad gallop, were headed in their direction.

“Hold it!” yelled Pat, suddenly leaping to his feet. In the forefront of the cavalcade he had sighted a cream pony, plain against the duns and greys around it. There was only one saddle horse in the valley like that, and Stella Yarrow rode it.

Then the horsemen hemmed in, bunching in a prancing, kicking melee.

“That you Curran?” shouted a burly rider, in checked shirt and brown riding breeches. Pat recognized the British accent of Ed Small, owner of the Arrow spread.

“Yep!” he yelled, dodging flying hooves.

“Those infernal Quito Cats played hell tonight!” roared Small. “Got away with a big bunch.”

“We’re holding them yonder. Cut down five of the bunch!”

“I’ll be damned!” ejaculated Small. “Good work, Curran!”

“Any prisoners?” the question came in Stella Yarrow’s imperious tones.

Pat hesitated. “Two by th’ fire,” he said at last.

“Let’s look th’ blighters over,” suggested Small. Pat led the way toward the smouldering coals. The punchers streamed behind him.

SOMEONE threw a pile of dead greasewood on the fire. The licking flames flared high, illuminating the dark features and the curious eyes of the tight-lipped punchers as they surrounded the defiant renegades.

“String ’em up!” growled a lantern jawed Boxed-W rider. An approving mutter, deep and menacing, rumbled from a score of throats.

Jaw set, Pat thrust himself in front of the prisoners. “There ain’t goin’ to be any lynchin’, boys. I’m turnin’ these hombres over t’ Sheriff Taylor.”

Stella Yarrow thrust her way to the front a puzzled look on her handsome face. “Going soft, Patrick Curran?” she sneered. The fire blazed up anew, throwing the features of the two prisoners in bold relief.

“Larry!” she gasped. Her face whitened, her voice sharp-edged with bitterness. “So that’s why you crave to save their necks!” Her voice was contemptuous as she again turned to face Pat.

Ed Small eyed the girl uneasily. He broke a brittle silence. “After all we can’t bame Curran. I’m damned if I’d hang my own brother.”

“He’s a rustler, isn’t he?” challenged the girl. “Why shouldn’t he hang?”

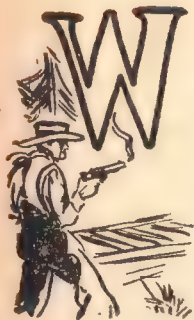
Hoarse murmurs of approval greeted the girl’s words. Two score of wrathful eyes sought Ed Small, awaiting his leadership. A gesture toward the iron in his holster and hell would have broken loose.

The Englishman eyed the crouching line of Bar-C punchers who had fallen silently in behind their leader, swept the circle of glowering waddies. “I’ll not sacrifice good men in a squabble over two infernal cow thieves,” he declared brusquely. “Let’s ride, boys.” He turned on his heel and strode toward his pony.

In a flash the tension relaxed. The Arrow riders hurried after their boss. Stella, angry tears glistening in her stormy eyes, flung herself out of the firelight. Pat turned to his men with a relieved grin.

“Hit leather, boys. We done enough for one night.”

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WHEN THE group of silent Bar-C riders tramped back from laying the three Bar-C men to rest beneath the cottonwoods, it was to find Stella Yarrow there. Pat strolled over to the porch where she had seated herself.

"Is he still here?" she inquired listlessly.

"Larry? Shore!" said Pat eyeing the girl with inward amazement. It was a different Stella from the angry woman who had demanded a quick hanging for the two rustlers only a few hours before.

"You won't turn him over to the Sheriff?"

"Yuh bet I will," replied Pat curtly.

Before the astonished Bar-C boss could move she flung her arms around his neck and pressed her face against his chest, sobbing convulsively.

Mechanically, the bewildered Pat patted her shaking shoulders and uttered awkward words of consolation.

"Excuse me!" May Hilton's cool voice as unexpected as a thunderbolt upon a cloudless day, reached his ears. His head jerked up out of Stella's copery tresses. With difficulty he disengaged the weeping girl's clinging arms and stepped, chagrined and confused, to the gallery rail. Dabbing at her eyes, the Yarrow girl turned away and paced slowly down the gallery.

"I'm sorry to intrude on such an affecting scene," May's voice was like ice. "I really rode over to thank Mr. Beeston for the lovely saddle horse he loaned me. Good day!"

APACHE dozed in the heat of noon when Pat rode in the following day. The circuit judge was due soon

and the Bar-C boss was slated to be one of the principal witnesses against the two prisoners.

The sun-scorched town never changed, reflected Pat, even the same mongrels nosed round the same garbage cans beside the American restaurant. But there was a change he rather sensed than saw. Puzzled, his eyes searched the wide, hoof-churned street as he jogged along. Then he knew—Mexicans! Never had he seen so many swarthy, sombreroed vaqueros in Apache Wells.

Suddenly alert, Pat shook the roan into a lope. He headed for the Sheriff's office, looked inside, dismounted and went in. He pulled a straight backed chair forward and faced the Sheriff.

"I got a hunch there ain't gonna be any trial today. I'm a heller for hunches."

Taylor's cold blue eyes bored into him. "Reckon I don't savvy." His voice was brittle.

Pat rose and strolled to the window. "Take a look-see," he invited. "Mexicans! Have yuh ever seen th' place so overcrowded with them?"

Taylor frowned out of the window. "By jiminy!" he ejaculated finally. "Mebbe yuh got somethin' there." He buckled on his gun belt and strolled outside, closely followed by Pat.

A six-gun roared before they reached the top of the courthouse steps. Instantly the dull double-boom of a shotgun followed.

"Hell!" shouted Taylor diving for his iron. "It's a hold-up—the Cattle-men's Bank!"

Tailing the Sheriff, who slid along toward the bank at a crouching run, Pat thumbed his hammer and cut down a yipping, shooting Mexican who pounded past. Lead began to drone in all directions.

As he approached the bank, Pat saw three scarlet-sashed renegades dart out. Two carried small, bulging canvas sacks. While the yelling horsemen

milled around the street, brandishing six-guns and blasting at everything in sight, the three threw themselves on waiting ponies and rowelled them through the swirling dust.

Taylor threw down on the leader as they flashed past. The man's pony crashed and threw its rider headlong into the dust. He lay limp and motionless. The canvas sack he had been clutching hit the road and rolled into the gutter. The cord broke and coin spilled out.

Pat took the second. At his first shot, the renegade's pony squealed and reared high. Another slug smashed the rider square in the chest. Cuddling the spoils against his body with one arm, he pitched backwards out of the saddle. The third pony, racing behind, crashed his head in with a thudding hoof as it flashed past.

In the wake of the remaining hold-up man the rest of the Mexicans poured down the bullet-swept street.

THEN, AS quickly as it had begun, the fracas was over. The last of the yelling renegades disappeared into the drifting alkali dust clouds.

"It was kinda hot while it lasted," commented Pat.

Taylor grunted and stepped out on to the street toward the canvas sacks, lying half empty, amid metallicly glinting money. "Th' buzzards never got away with a dollar," he said with satisfaction. Then with a sharp exclamation, he stopped, gazed down at the dust with staring eyes, "Look at this, Curran!" he rasped.

Pat hurried to his side. Taylor bent and gathered a handful of circular metal slugs, the size of twenty-dollar gold pieces. Apparently they were made of iron. Pat jerked the other sack from beneath the stiffening arm of the dead man, and found the same.

"Them sacks were never out of our sight," declared Taylor forcefully. "Let's go see Lyman!"

Bony, blue-veined hands grasping a shotgun, Jules Lyman, president of the Cattlemen's Bank, stood on the plank walk outside the door of his premises, surrounded by an excited group of punchers and townsmen.

"Hey, Jules!" snapped Taylor, elbowing through the throng. "I want t' see yuh inside, pronto."

Lyman nodded, and followed them leisurely into the shaded silence of the bank. Pat dogged his footsteps.

Taylor crossed the polished floor, dumped his sacks by the cashier's wicket. A white-faced clerk was sweeping up glass from the shattered windows.

"These ain't nuthin' but slugs," accused Taylor, dipping into the sack and spilling a handful over the smooth counter.

"I am perfectly well aware of that," returned the banker crisply. Pat fancied that his precise tone was shaded by annoyance. "They were prepared for just such an emergency as this."

"Yuh been holdin' these blanks f'r a hold-up?" the Sheriff's voice reflected amazed admiration.

"Exactly."

"Yuh might've tipped me off," grumbled Taylor.

"When two share a secret, it immediately ceases to be a secret," returned Lyman briskly. His features creased into a mechanical smile. "But I deeply appreciate your services, Sheriff."

"Kin yuh match it?" growled Taylor, as the two men again stepped into the bright sunlight. "That tight-mouthed money-changer is so doggoned slick he kin hog-swiggle a hold-up man."

Suddenly Taylor looked around with a quick frown. "Where's Tiny?" he said irritably.

"Where did yuh leave him?" inquired Pat.

"In th' hoosegow. Th' eatery sends chow over t' th' prisoners at noon.

Tiny shoulda locked up and come arunnin' when the fracas started."

A sudden premonition hit Pat. "My guess," he said slowly, "is that Tiny ain't in-a fit state to come arunnin'!"

THE TWO men exchanged glances and began to run toward the jail. As they hurried across the bare patch in front of the building they saw that the door was swung half open. A wide passage-way led from the door with three iron-barred cells on each side.

As they entered Pat saw that the six cell doors were swinging open. Taylor dropped to his knees beside the outstretched figure of Tiny. The big deputy sprawled on his back, eyes closed. Blood oozed from a gash above his right eye.

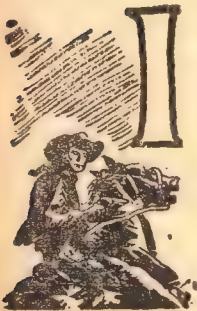
A bucket of water stood near a cell door. They poured the water over Tiny, to be rewarded by a faint stirring of the gross body. His eyes flickered open and he stared around stupidly. Understanding slowly flowed into them. He sat up, cradled his forehead with both hands, retched violently.

"How did they git yuh?" Taylor asked sharply.

"Some Mex toted in th' chow," mumbled Tiny. "Th' Curran guy yelled. When I was turned, th' Mex conked me."

"Yore one hell of a deputy," ground out Taylor.

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IT WAS starlight when Pat rode into the Bar-C again. A cigaret glowed red in the obscurity of the gallery. Bandy's brusque voice hailed him through the gloom. "Trial date set?"

"There won't be any trial," returned the Bar-C boss shortly.

They strolled back to the gallery, past the glowing windows of the bunkhouse. "Pecos brought the mare in this forenoon," volunteered Bandy, suddenly switching the conversation. "Miss May says she don't need a hoss. Th' gal was tickled pink when I took it over," he added thoughtfully.

Pat's thoughts flashed back to the scene with Stella Yarrow on the gallery. The excitement of the past two days had crowded out the recollections of May Hilton's coolness. At Bandy's words, the old baffled anger surged anew.

"I'm ridin' over t' Antelope at sun-up," he snapped. "An I'll take th' mare."

The chickens were scratching around the cabin on the creek and the notes of a plaintive southern melody floated from the kitchen, when Pat rode across the meadow, leading Bandy's mare on a macarty.

"Hello th' house!" he yelled, swinging out of leather. The singing stopped. May opened the door a scant six inches and peeked out. At sight of her visitor, her lips compressed.

"Good morning, Mr. Curran," she said primly.

"Mornin' ma'am," he grunted. "Can I come inside a minute an' rest my laigs?"

"It's your cabin!" Chin uplifted and eyes cool, she stood aside as he entered.

"See here," he began abruptly. "Yuh got me an' that gal all wrong."

"I am not in the least interested in you and Miss Yarrow," she returned coldly. "If you wish to express your emotions in full view of every passerby, that is your privilege."

"Our emotions, hell!" he exploded.

"Mr. Curran," said May quietly. "I think you had better go."

More upset than he would admit to himself by his break with May Hilton, Pat sat in the little office checking over ranch accounts until long after the lights were doused in the bunkhouse.

The door behind him creaked as he bent over his books. It might have been a night breeze sighing softly through the slit window, but a sixth sense warned Pat that someone stood in the doorway. Hanging on a peg, just out of reach, was his gunbelt.

Every faculty alert, muscles tensed, he continued to flip pages. The flesh on his shoulders crept as he awaited the impact of a knife or the stunning slap of a bullet. The faint creak of leather reached his straining ears. Whirling, Pat kicked his chair sideways.... There, leaning silently against the door jamb, lips twisted in an amused grin, was Larry. His brother's right hand rested negligently on the dark polished butt of a six-gun.

"Ain't skeered, are yuh?" he drawled.

Pat drew a deep breath. "What's th' idea ghostin' in like a doggoned Apache?"

Larry nodded toward the overturned chair. "Set down. We gotta palaver." He dropped his Stetson beside Pat's on the desk, swept the books carelessly to one side, and sat down, legs swinging.

"Th' Cats figger the Bar-C is a damn pest," he started abruptly.

"You wouldn't be scared of th' Bar-C?"

Larry spat contemptuously. "Hell, we could clean out this spread quicker'n a lobo could pull down a calf. If yuh don't take this chance yuh won't be here t' get another!"

PAT SAT back in his chair silently weighing the implications of this midnight visit. If the Cats figured they could wipe out the Bar-C opposition as easily as they claimed, then they wouldn't waste time dickering; Pat was sure of that.

He smiled slowly. "I still figure yore scared. We'll string up every Mex who crosses th' Bar-C range—an' that goes f'r you, too!"

Quick anger blazed in Larry's reck-

less eyes. "Yuh talk big, but we'll trim yuh down," he promised thickly.

"I ain't through yet," continued his brother easily. "I wouldn't make no dicker with any measly flea-bitten coyote who'd wrong a gal an' bushwhack her paw."

Teeth bared in a smile, Larry leapt to his feet and stared down at his brother's contemptuous face. The renegade's fingers clutched convulsively over the butt of his six-gun. "I could blast yuh f'r that!" he grated.

"That's just about your style," taunted his brother. "I ain't heeled." He glanced toward his gunbelt on the wall. "If'n yuh'll let me buckle on my belt, we'll shoot it out—right now!"

Features twisted with rage, knuckles on the hand that held the gun showing white, Larry backed. Eyes never leaving Pat's accusing face, he grabbed a Stetson off the desk and thrust it on his head.

"We'll shoot it out," he panted, "when I'm good and ready."

With Pat's derisive laugh ringing in his ears he rushed out of the room. His brother heard his footsteps die away along the corridor.

After Larry had gone, Pat picked up the remaining Stetson and eyed it with distaste. "Th' fool's gone an' taken th' wrong lid," he murmured in disgust, and scaled it into a corner of the room. The butt of his brother's cigaret smoked on the floor. He was stamping it out when a sudden thought struck him. He sank to his knees, gathered the shreds of tobacco. They were dark colored—almost black—and so were the butts that the bushwhacker had dropped at Willow Spring.

Shaken by an inner turmoil, he paced out on to the long gallery. A rider emerged from the cottonwoods, heading south. It was Larry. The watcher was about to turn and re-enter the house when he straightened, rubbed his eyes in bewilderment. Another rider issued from the same clump of trees. He, too, hit south, trailing

Larry. It was Silent Sexton. There was no mistaking that rangy claybank and Sexton's bulky form.

What was the wandering prospector's game? Was he following Larry to make sure he wasn't trailed? Was he the real leader of the Cats? Brow wrinkled, Pat watched as the rider's figure grew indistinct and blended into the night.

AT NOON-MESS next day the door was flung open to admit Pecos and three strange riders. Every head swivelled. The grizzled old-timer rounded the table, dropped a package of mail in front of Pat. The newcomers with brief nods, slid into vacant seats and proceeded with the business of eating.

"Roped them boys in town," volunteered Pecos.

"We can use 'em an' more," approved Pat. "Any news?"

"Nope. Reckon yuh know th' cattlemen meet tonight at th' Arrow."

Pat shot a swift glance at Bandy. "Hear that?" he asked as Pecos moved away.

"Pears like they plumb furgot to invite th' Bar-C."

"Why?"

"Don't need much savvy t' read th' sign—yuh ain't wanted."

"I still ask—why?" There was a sharp edge to Pat's voice.

Bandy hesitated. "Mebbe—mebbe they figger yore saving them two nighthawks f'r th' Sheriff and that jail break were mighty convenient—f'r th' Cats!"

"Didn't we bust up that raid?" Pat's voice was belligerent.

"Don't jump me," growled Bandy. "There's only one way t' prove my idea's haywire—horn in!"

"That's just what I aim t' do!"

WHEN HE dismounted at the Arrow that night and noted the brands upon the row of ponies tethered along the corral fence, his black mood

deepened. Every outfit was represented except the Terrapin and the Bar-C. So they classed him with a Mexican half-breed! Hard-eyed, he strode up to the house.

The steady drone of voices came from within. Ed Small's deep voice bellowed a request for order.

Pat flung open the door and abruptly stepped inside.

"Curran!" Ed Small's gruff roar of surprise boomed across the room. Instantly the rumble of voices ceased, every eye focused on the spare figure by the door. "Waal, I'm here," announced Pat laconically.

Small cleared his throat nervously. "—er—what for?"

"Ain't this a meetin' of th' Valley cowman. Guess I rod th' biggest spread."

The Arrow owner was regaining his composure. "I invited a few neighbors to my home. You're not included, Curran. I really must ask you to leave."

"I'll leave pronto, but I aim t' ask a few questions first." Pat coolly met the impact of curious, hostile eyes.

"Every spread in th' valley had a rep here except th' Bar-C an' th' Terrapin. Ike Ely rods th' Terrapin, an' he ain't fit company f'r a rattlesnake, so I can't blame yuh f'r barrin' him. But I've been holdin' th' Cats back from your cows. Ain't so long ago that my boys smashed a raid an' saved maybe a thousand head. An' yuh act like I was a polecat. It stinks!" His voice cut like a lash.

Chill silence greeted his challenge. Stolid Dutch Hendryx broke the spell. "Vere ist Larry?" he demanded heavily.

"How would I know?"

"You was in Apache when he broke out th' hoosegow!"

"Who killed my Dad?" Like the crack of a bull-whip the question snapped from Stella Yarrow's lips.

"What outfit did yuh ride f'r South of the Border?" A broad shouldered cowman, grey eyes searching Pat's

features from below bushy eyebrows, growled the question.

"Are yuh all through," demanded the Bar-C boss derisively. He swung toward Ed Small. "Yuh ain't stated th' reason f'r this talk fest."

"To discuss Valley rustling," returned the Arrow boss stiffly.

"Waal, yuh don't need me, so I'll vamoose. An' I ain't losin' any more good men savin' yore stock. If th' Cat's lay off me, I'll lay off'n them. So-long!" With a tight grin he turned toward the door, stepped out into the night.

RAGING inwardly, Pat stepped to his pony. Suddenly he heard steps approaching, turned his head. The square figure of the grey-eyed cowman was outlined in the gloom.

"How's Mike McGrew?" The softly-spoken question tensed Pat like a taut bowstring. Slowly he straightened, right hand dropping toward the gun at his hip.

"An' nix on th' gunplay," said the stranger calmly. "I got yuh covered!"

"Who might Mike McGrew be?" growled Pat, fighting for time. "An' who th' hell are you?"

"Mike's a one-eyed jasper. Th' Cats are kittens beside his gang. Me—I'm John Drake, served six years as Marshal at El Paso. Hired out recent as a foreman to Small. Seems like we mighta met."

"Yuh wouldn't be totin' a warrant with that gun."

"Nope. Never could git th' deadwood on Mike's boys," admitted Drake. "Th' gang works mostly south of th' Border. Anyways, I ain't roddin' th' Law these days."

PAT'S TENSED muscles relaxed. He jerked the makin's from a vest pocket, thinking fast. His eyes dwelt appraisingly on Drake's square features. There was gruff sincerity in the ex-Marshall's deep voice. If he knew as much as Pat suspected, and if he

talked, the boss of the Bar-C knew that only one trail was left open, and that led back to the Rio Grande, to ride again with McGrew's devil-may-care desperadoes.

"Drake, I'm gonna spin a yarn." He spoke slowly. "Then I figger on askin' just one question. If'n the answer is 'No,' then I'm a-comin' rollin' smoke. So get set." He drew deeply on his quiry.

"The yarn's about a youngster who quit his home corral when he was a button. He never knew his maw, an' his paw was hard, mighty hard. Th' kid nigh died of thirst. He crossed th' border and th' Mexicans run his pony off. He drifted from one cow town t' another. One night, in a cantina, a Mex tried t' knife him. He blasted th' Mex, but a pack of them got him cornered; they would have ripped him up, but a one-eyed gent drifts in. When that gent's sixes stopped smoking, there wasn't a Mex in th' joint, except three or four twistin' on th' floor. That was Mike McGrew, he treated the kid swell, fed him good, an' gave him a hoss. Guess that kid worshipped Mike. When he got a chance to ride and fight, live high an' handsome in Mike's gang, he grabbed it.

"Waal, th' kid got older an' wiser an' wearied of th' owlhoot trail. Then he heard his paw had cashed in, figured he'd pull out an' ride a straight trail. He hit out f'r th' home ranch—an' ran right into gunsmoke. His brother had turned hooter an' th' spread was fallin' apart. He swore he'd get th' spread back on its old footin' come hell or high water. Waal, it's hard, mighty hard."

Pat crushed his butt under a high-heeled riding boot. His arm hung loosely above his holster "Now if'n yuh was t' meet that fella, would yuh give him a break?"

"I guess I would, Curran. Good luck!" he extended his hand. "I guess I got yuh figgered all wrong. I thought yuh was the Concho Kid, but I guessed

he musta passed out on the Rio Grande."

Pat smiled and gripped the outstretched hand. "If you ever git in a jackpot, I've got 'bout twenty good boys over at th' Bar-C who might help yuh out."

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AT NOON the next day, Hank Taylor ambled in on his flea-bitten grey. Tiny, the deputy, bulked big beside him. Pat was shoeing his pony.

"Howdy!" he yelled.

Taylor nodded curtly, eyes suddenly puzzled. Dismounting, he strolled into the shop. Tiny tailed him, a battered Stetson dangling from his hand.

"This yore lid?" Taylor's voice was hard.

Pat glanced at the dusty headpiece, noted the broken chin strap.

"Shore is," he replied easily, indicating the initials, P.C., burned into the sweatband. "Howcome you're totin' it?"

"Picked it up on th' Arrow," said Taylor watching him narrowly. "A hoss thief dropped it last night."

"The significance of the Sheriff's words suddenly burst on Pat. "Yuh mean—"

"You're under arrest, Curran. A bunch of Ed Small's hosses were run off, and Drake, his foreman, was shot dead."

PAT SADDLED up, and under the silent survey of the curious waddies, the lawmen and their prisoner headed northward for Apache Wells.

Jogging along interminable miles through the blazing heat of midday. Pat glumly reviewed the situation, and found small comfort. Already he was

convicted in the minds of the valley ranchers; even the faith of loyal old Bandy had been shaken when he had told him. His past record, and the damning evidence of the Stetson, his own admission that he had seen Ed Small's horses rustled, would bring a prompt "guilty" verdict from any jury. The best he could expect would be a long prison term; the worst, a rope. Sudden desperation in his eyes, he stared hungrily at the blue-shadowed Tortugas. In that maze of arid canyons, twisted ravines and rugged peaks he would be safe from pursuit.

For an hour the lawmen and their prisoner jogged northward. One idea possessed Pat now—he must get free and clear himself somehow, and to do so he must break away from his taciturn guards, the quicker the better.

His chance came quickly. The trail dropped down between bunched mesquite into a wash, with steep cut banks that curved back into the hills. The narrowed trail pushed them into single file. Tiny reined up. The Sheriff headed downwards, his pony slipping and sliding on the sandy slope. Pat tailed him, while the deputy brought up the rear.

Head to tail the ponies wound across the boulder studded wash. Taylor's mount took the steep ascent up to the farther bank at a lope. Pat followed. Half way up the bank, he yanked the roan on its haunches. Before the slow-thinking Tiny grasped his intent, he whirled round, plunged straight down on the deputy's pony plodding behind.

Tiny's mount swerved and reared in a thick dust flurry. Almost unseated, the big deputy grabbed leather with one hand and yanked the reins with the other.

Wheeling behind the pitching, lashing pony, Pat shook the roan into a gallop and hightailed along the wash. In a dozen bounds his mount rounded a curve and was out of Tiny's line of fire.

Suddenly he flashed past a deep

cleft in the cliff side to his right and he knew his troubles were over. The cleft opened out at the top, too wide for a horse to jump. The only way the sheriff and his deputy could get on Pat's trail now was to backtrack to where Pat had originally made his get-away, and start afresh from there. Knowing it was hopeless, he sat his horse at the brim of the cleft and chose to watch Pat disappear into the maze that was the foot hills of the Tortulas.

Half an hour later Pat slowed his blowing animal down to a trot, pondered on what he should do next. Thoughts of May Hilton crowded into his brain. That was it! He would head straight for the cabin at Antelope Creek, convince May in a few well chosen words that she was all wrong about him and Stella Yarrow...even if he couldn't, he could still ask her to ride into the Bar-C and fetch Bandy out. He had to regain contact with the spread somehow, and he more than suspected that Taylor would be keeping an eye on it from now on.

REACHING this decision, he wheeled the roan around in a semi-circle and hit south for Antelope Creek. Two hours passed before he sighted the welcome willow-fringed water through the dancing heat waves. He grimly thanked the gods that Taylor didn't know about his interest in the nester family—yet.

Reaching the Hilton cabin, he knocked on the door. The thin voice of May's father answered, quivering with excitement. Pat pushed in, entered the bedroom, a cold premonition gripping him. If anything had happened to May... Face flushed, the helpless Hilton greeted him with a torrent of words.

Pat's brow darkened as he listened. "Lemme get this straight," he finally broke in. "Larry rode up yesterday at sundown with some Mexicans. They

grabbed May and vamoosed. The lousy coyotes!"

Hurriedly he set food and water beside the crippled man. "Funny thing," volunteered old man Hilton, "they didn't head back for El Quito. Heard one of them say something about th' Tortulas—"

It stopped Pat in his tracks. To have found May in El Quito would have been tough enough, but if they had a hide-out in the Tortulas—it might take months. He swept through the door and vaulted into leather.

Night slowly swathed the rock-bound fastness in grey mystery. Pat headed for the foothills. Riding blind, he threaded among dry water courses, passed through heat-scorched canyons, crossed barren ridges. Suddenly, as the roan clattered down a narrow, winding ravine, he yanked it to a halt. Through the night, like a flickering match, a campfire glimmered ahead.

At a walk, Pat drifted closer, searching for signs of life around the fire. It was built a dozen yards from the mouth of a small canyon. Nearby a bedroll was spooled. From the gloom outside the wavering circle of light a pony nickered:

Pat slid out of leather. Mechanically his hand strayed toward his gun-belt. Sliding along the wall of the ravine, he inched toward the blaze. A hard voice threw him back on his heels.

"Hold it, Mister!" Winchester slanted forward, Sexton's bulky figure appeared, indistinct in the shadows. Pat's fingers tightened on the smooth butt of his Colt. He strode forward into the light, eyes glued to the inclined barrel of the Winchester, flexed for a lighting draw.

"Waal, waal!" commented Sexton laconically. "If'n it ain't my old pal, Curran! What yuh doin' around here?"

"Maybe I'm prospectin'—like you!" Eyeing each other like strange dogs,

they hunkered on opposite sides of the fire. Pat rolled a quirly.

"I'm prospectin' f'r th' Cat's hide-out," he said slowly, watching Sexton's face. "Larry—that's my kid brother—kidnapped a nester gal, friend of mine. Maybe you can set me on th' right trail."

For a long moment they eyed each other over the dancing flames. "Mean-in'?" asked Sexton softly.

"When I run into trouble I run into you," said Pat. "I don't savvy."

Sexton's body slackened, and his face creased into his peculiar silent laugh. He sank back on to the ground.

"I mosey around." He glanced in the direction of the roan, ground-hitched in the mouth of the canyon. "Why we spittin' like a set of wild-cats. Shuck yuh saddle an' stay awhile."

"Guess I'll drift," drawled Pat. "I don't feel safe with you around." Again the dark man doubled in a paroxysm of silent laughter. Pat strode toward his mount.

PAT PICKETED the roan beneath a solitary tree and pitched dry camp.

Stretched out, propped on his elbows, he surveyed the panorama of mesas, canyons and gullies. Nothing moved in the vast expanse save an eagle floating on motionless pinions.

Through the hours Pat lay waiting and watching. At last, as he sweltered in the torrid heat, a vagrant dust streamer caught his eye. Soon he was able to pick up a lone rider, loping easily through the hills. Finally the rider emerged at the foot of a great irregular rock wall that zigzagged southward. He wheeled, followed the indentations of the wall. Then, in a flash, he was gone.

Pat blinked and searched in the vicinity of the spot. The rider had just disappeared into thin air like a wraith. The dust cloud raised by the pony's hooves still hung in the air, but horse

and rider had vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed them.

Immediately east of where they had last been visible, two mesas rose in strata upon strata of multi-colored rock. Noting them for markers, Pat scrambled to his feet and scrambled down to his mount.

He pressed southwest, hard on the trail of the mysterious rider, toward the twin mesas. Finally further progress was barred by a rock wall. From the mesa top it had appeared low. Actually it was an age-scarred precipice that rose fully a hundred feet above his head.

Pat dismounted. Carefully he cast around, seeking signs on the hard-packed rock and on the crumbling ground, powdered thick with alkali dust. Plainly outlined were the imprints of many hooves, apparently leading straight into the impenetrable rock. Pulse quickening, he followed the tracks. Many horsemen had passed that way—to ride straight into the rock wall.

Brow furrowed, he scanned the ground—and with a quick gasp of comprehension, moved forward. At the very base of the wall the footprints swerved to the left. Like a hound on the scent, he crunched forward through the dry debris, rounded a huge fragment of rim-rock, and then stopped with a grim smile of satisfaction—the wall was sundered slantwise, as though cleft by a titan's axe. Invisible at fifty paces, the huge fissure extended from top to bottom of the cliff. No more than six feet in width, it offered ample space for the passage of men and animals.

For a moment he was tempted to push ahead and explore its gloomy depths, but caution pulled him back. If this was the getaway to the renegade's hideout, it would be well guarded.

His eyes rested on the twin mesas, simmering through the heat waves. Eagerly he hurried back to the roan.

He would climb to the top of the nearest of the twin mesas and see if he could discern what lay beyond the shadowed cleft.

On the east side he found the spot most suited to climbing, shucked spurs and chaps and commenced to clamber upwards.

LABORIOUSLY he struggled toward the top, panting and perspiring. Cholla bunched in the crevices lacerated his hands even through his riding gloves. His sharp toed boots slid on the smooth rock, sweat glued the shirt to his back.

When finally he wormed over the brim, he lay outstretched, chest heaving as he sucked air into his laboring lungs. When his heart slowed to its normal tempo, he rose and crossed the summit to its western edge, flattened and crawled forward. Cautiously he raised his head.

"I'll be damned!" The amazed exclamation slipped between his parted lips. Outspread before him was a vast purple vista of tortured nature, a rock-ribbed jumble of twisted canyons and serried hills. Directly below him, and dwarfed so that it seemed no higher than himself, lay the wall. Behind it was set a pear-shaped valley, the stem of which formed the passage through the wall. At the further end of the valley the chaparral showed verdant green.

Grazing across the valley were hundreds of slow-moving dots—steers. In the brush, the outlines of several cabins were visible. A thin column of smoke snaked up from a campfire.

Pat, straining his eyes, saw men coming in and out of the cabins, a bunch of ponies drifted around a pole corral, water sparkled in a trough. The whole valley was hemmed in by steep cliffs. The only exit was the break in the wall.

He eased back from the brim, pulled on his battered gloves, climbed down to his pony. Common sense told him

to ride for the Bar-C range and stage a surprise attack with a force of armed men. Against this, impulse urged him to steal into the renegade lair and rescue May. It would take two days before the Bar-C could reach the valley. He might return to find the hideout deserted and May spirited away.

The shadow of the mesa stretched away before him. In two hours the sun would sink. If his luck held he might be able to pry May loose and be back over the border before dawn.

By the wan light of the stars, Pat slid out of leather at the break in the wall. Spurless, he eased into the gloomy recesses of the fissure. Through inky blackness he groped his way forward, fingering the rock cleft that rose on either side. A dozen times he stumbled over boulders, and froze awaiting the challenge of the guard or a belch of flame from a ready gun. But no sound came from the gloom ahead.

The passage curved. A familiar sound came to his ears, the bellow of a cow. All of a sudden he stepped out on the dry turf of an open meadow.

Pat felt as though he had emerged from a deep cavern. His chest expanded and he breathed deeply as he moved forward.

The blur of men approaching across the meadow halted him. He turned to regain the shelter of the wall...the muzzle of a gun ground into the small of his back, Larry's voice rasped behind him. "Hist them!"

Pat's muscles tensed for a desperate break. Half a dozen vaqueros took shape around him and his reluctant arms came up shoulder high. A hand twitched the Colt out of his holster and Larry prodded him forward.

"We've been waitin' f'r yuh," Larry chuckled. "Yuh shore didn't waste much time."

Waiting! Seething with chagrin, Pat remembered Silent Sexton. He swung around as the gun galled his back. "Th' game ain't played out yet!"

"Mebbe not," growled his brother, "but you'll be in th' discard—pronto!"

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T LARRY'S gruff order the vaqueros slanted off toward the nearest cabin. The door hung open on rawhide hinges. By the light of the blazing campfire, as he was thrust inside, Pat saw that its one room was destitute of furnishings. A pile of broken saddlery, torn blankets and discarded clothing was heaped in one corner.

"Hogtie th' maverick," grated Larry. He watched while the job was done, then jerked his head toward the doorway. The vaqueros vanished.

Larry stepped close to the bound figure, placed his hand against Pat's chest and roughly shoved him backwards. Helpless, he toppled over and lay at full length in the rubbish that littered the earthen floor.

"That's where yuh belong," rasped the renegade. "Lookin' up at me—th' boss."

"Someday I'll look up—watchin' yuh swing," taunted Pat.

"Not you!" grinned his brother wolfishly. "Yuh won't be there."

His spare form was outlined in the glow of the fire, then the door slammed shut and the prisoner was left alone to his own gloomy thoughts.

A frenzy of impotent rage swept over him. Madly he writhed and twisted in the darkness, rolling over and over as he struggled to wrench free of his bonds.

The spasm quickly passed. He lay panting, wrists burning from the bite of the rope. Bitterly he cursed himself for a crazy fool. If he had ridden to the Bar-C the Cats would have been trapped. Now they would clean out the valley, ride south taking May with

them, and leave his body to rot in the valley.

Ponies whinnied in the corral. The Cats were riding.

ROLLING over and over like a log, Pat worked toward the pile of junk in the corner. Pushing backward into the heap, he fumbled with his fingers. Broken straps, a cinch, a battered riding boot, soft rags, a torn blanket—slowly he worked through them, seeking the sharp edge of a broken bottle. His hands closed on the neck of one, but to his dismay he found it to be an unbroken specimen.

Nothing daunted, he struggled to a sitting position, gripped the bottle in both hands and pounded it on the earth behind him. But the chafing rope cutting into his wrists gave little play. The thick glass remained unbroken.

He dropped the bottle, twisted his body around. Placing the bottle between his feet he pushed down and forced it between the lashings. Leaning back, he raised his lashed legs high, then swung forward, smashing the bottle against the hard-packed ground. At the fourth time it shattered with a harsh jingle.

Half an hour's work followed with a jagged sliver before the bonds parted. Blood flowed from his finger tips from cuts in the wrist inflicted each time the sliver had slipped.

Next he attacked the ropes around his legs. The next moment he staggered to his feet, only to promptly collapse again as his numbed legs refused to carry his weight. Gradually the blood began to circulate as he rubbed the deadened limbs.

Crossing to the door, he peered out through the space where it sagged on the rawhide hinges. Not fifty yards distant three Mexicans hunched around the dying fire. Cautiously he pushed at the door, but it was fastened securely on the outside. Retrieving his sliver of glass he went to work on the

rawhide hinges...eyes focused on the men by the fire. Pat slid outside and flattened against the front of the shack. The cabin to his right looked the best of the three in sight, and was therefore probably the one in which May was confined.

He glided through the undergrowth like a shadow. Creeping up to the darkened cabin from the rear, he glimpsed a small aperture that served as a window, not a foot square. Silently he cat-toed toward it. Raising himself on tiptoe, he gazed inside. The interior was a pool of darkness.

Clothing rustled. Someone moved. "May!" he whispered.

A patch of white blurred the gloom and he looked down into the girl's pale, upraised face.

"Oh, Pat!" There was a world of relief and longing in her soft voice.

"You all right, honey?"

"Jest terribly lonely."

"I'll pry yuh out, pronto!"

"Be careful," she whispered anxiously. "There's a guard in front."

"I'll go get him, right now," he promised grimly. "Bye!"

Pulses throbbing with suppressed excitement, Pat slithered along the side of the cabin. At the corner, he paused, peering.

A dozen yards from the door, perched on a log, rifle across his knees, was the shapeless form of the guard silhouetted plain against the reddening ashes of the fire.

Crouching, Pat inched forward, fingers curved, eyes intent upon the unsuspecting guard's back. The ground was littered with dead leaves and twigs. A piece of wood snapped loudly beneath his boot. The Mexican slewed round.

AT THE SIGHT of the crouching figure, a startled yell left his throat. Pat dove sideways as the Mexican's gun lanced red and the sharp report thundered around the surrounding cliffs.

Unharméd, Pat scrambled to his feet and darted around the cabin heading for the shelter of the chaparral. Again the rifle spanged. The slug screamed high above his head. Shielded by the darkness, the fugitive threw himself down behind a squat bush and watched his pursuers.

Four more vaqueros now reinforced the guard. They spread out, beating through the chaparral and advancing directly toward Pat's recumbent figure. In the growing light, discovery was only a matter of minutes.

He jumped to his feet, dodging and darting through the light-splashed saplings like a jack rabbit. A shout from the rear spurred him to greater effort. Rifles cracked viciously.

Oblivious of the singing lead, Pat plunged toward the corral. For a moment he stopped to grab a rope and a bridle from the saddles heaped outside. He slipped under the pole that barred the entrance.

A swift cast and he roped the nearest pony. In a trice he had slipped on the bridle and was astride the crow-hopping animal. Flailing it across the flanks with the rope's end, he pulled close to the gate and let down the pole. Wheeling, he hazed the remaining ponies out of the corral with the lashing rope.

Bent low over the neck of the racing animal, Pat shot out on the heels of the stampeding ponies. With a frenzied drumming of hooves they streamed across the flat expanse, necks outstretched. The vaqueros were running and yelling, floundering through the brush. Guns flashed around Pat as he pounded past the cabins. A pony ahead screamed and crashed. Then with his remuda, he gained the comparative quiet of the pasture, cows breaking wildly to either side ahead of the panic stricken ponies' rush.

The fugitive reined back as the snorting animals slowed. Circling their flanks, he herded them toward the

break in the wall. High on the rocks overhead a guard challenged and a rifle lanced red. Before the echoes had died, Pat was hazing the vaqueros' saddle horses through the great fissure.

Emerging beyond the wall, he scattered the stampeded animals and hit north toward the Bar-C.

GAUNT SHADOWS of the cottonwoods draped the ranch house, when Pat rode into the Bar-C. Stiff and sore he climbed down from the weary, dust-grimed pony and walked toward the house. John, the wrinkled Chinaman, stuck his head out of the cook-house window, beat a cleaver frantically upon a can and ducked out of sight again like a startled prairie dog. Two waddies motioned silently from the door of a barn. Bandy stood as though fossilised upon the gallery.

"Is th' whole damned outfit loco?" muttered Pat, glaring at the motionless Bandy. "Yuh struck dumb!" he grated.

The old foreman gestured toward the door of the house, opened his mouth to speak, when a heavy step shook the stairs behind Pat. He swung round. Tiny, the massive deputy, lumbered close, hand on the butt of his gun. Out of the open door ahead strolled Hank Taylor, blue eyes glinting with satisfaction, jaw working spasmodically upon a chew.

"Put 'em up, Curran," he rasped, with a quick glance at Pat's waist. "I figgered you'd drift back t' th' home corral." His brow creased in surprise as he noted the absence of a gun belt.

"Listen!" said Pat impatiently. "I found th' Cats' hideout. They got a thousand head of rustled stock an' they're holdin' May Hilton. We gotta ride south—pronto!"

"South, hell," barked the gimlet-eyed Sheriff. "Yuh're wanted f'r murder, hoss stealin' and escapin' from custody. We're ridin' t' Apache City right now."

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PAT'S SECOND ride into Apache Wells was an uneventful one this time. The two John Laws kept a closer watch on him than two lobos on a tender young calf. Pat noted indifferently that their entry into

Apache caused little stir. Few were abroad in the heat of the noonday sun. A Boxed-W waddy grinned from the shadow of the plank walk. "Mebbe remembers his hike home from Willow Springs," thought Pat. The spare figure of Tighman, president of the Cattlemen's Bank, blocked the doorway of his premises, following the progress of the horses with blank eyes. Pat never could stomach the thin-lipped banker. His skin bore too great a resemblance to the underside of a dead fish and his handshake was too clammy.

Hank unlocked the door of the adobe jail. A fleshy Mexican wept loudly in one cell; a rider, the worse for wear, snored out a drunken stupor in another.

The barred cell door clanged behind Pat and he sank listlessly on the hard mattress that covered the wooden bunk. After a long ride through the heat of the valley the shade of the gaol was a welcome relief. With all hope of saving May Hilton gone, he was unconcerned about his own fate.

But Pat writhed in torturing resentment at the thought of the renegade's triumph. At last he could remain still no longer. He sprang to his feet and paced the cell, padding restlessly from side to side like a caged animal. The jangle of the deputy's keys reached his ears.

Stella Yarrow's husky voice sounded above the deep rumble of Tiny's tones.

Pat stopped in his tracks and watched the door open. What had brought Yarrow's proud daughter to the Apache Wells jail?

The girl stepped inside and glanced quickly around. Pat saw her eyes were dull and her lips quivered as she approached the bars of the cell.

"What's th' trouble now?" demanded the prisoner roughly. He had grief enough of his own and he was in no mood to sympathize with the emotional owner of the Boxed-W.

"Larry's dead!" she whispered, and began to weep silently into her handkerchief.

"Dead!" echoed Pat aghast. "Hell, he can't be. He was alive two days back."

"My boys just brought his body into town." Her voice was faint and broken with sobs. "The Cats raided us again last night and he was shot."

"Did he talk?" Pat's voice was anxious, strained.

"No," she faltered. "He was dead when they found him at sunup." She dried her eyes and started at Pat's set features. "Aren't you sorry?"

"I'll say I'm sorry," he retorted bitterly. "Larry's death hangs me."

ALONE ONCE more the prisoner pondered over the astounding news Stella had brought him. The death of Larry destroyed his last chance of proving his innocence of John Drake's killing.

With a deep groan that welled from utter despair in his heart he slumped upon the hard prisoner bed.

For the second time, the heavy door swung open protestingly on its hinges. Slumped on his bunk the prisoner glanced up listlessly. The deputy was alone. Heaving his bulk along the narrow passageway, Tiny fitted a key to the lock of Pat's cell and flung the grilled door open.

"Hanks wants t' see yuh," he announced.

The deputy steered Pat through the

rear door of the courthouse. They traversed a long corridor. Reaching the Sheriff's office, Tiny pushed the prisoner inside, slammed the door after him and clumped off.

Hank Taylor leaned back in his chair, feet elevated upon the spur-scratched desk. He nodded genially. "Take th' weight off'n yuh legs, Pat." His hard, blue eyes surveyed the prisoner's downcast features.

Pat dropped into a chair and waited listlessly.

"Smoke?" The Sheriff tossed over a sack of tobacco and a book of papers. Pat mechanically rolled a quirly. "Butterin' me," he thought, "before he puts on th' pressure!"

"Light?" Taylor scraped a match on the desk top and held it out.

Pat accepted. "Now cut out th' lovin' kindness, Hank. I ain't got nuthin' t' confess."

The Sheriff's yellowed teeth showed in a quick grin. "Perk up. We got th' deadwood on the Apache Valley lobos. Grab your hat an' walk out any time yuh want. Your hoss is in th' livery barn."

For a moment Pat sat motionless, staring stupidly at Taylor's seamed features. "Say that agin," he said, with puzzled eyes.

"Th' charges are squashed. Yore cleared. Yuh kin beat it!" snapped the other. "Ain't that plain?" And when Pat made no effort to move. "F'r gosh sakes, snap out of it. You're a free man!"

Heavy steps resounded on the wooden boards of the corridor outside. The door was flung open and Silent Sexton stood framed in the doorway. His deep-set eyes ran over the Sheriff's wiry figure and Pat's sagging form. He grinned mirthlessly, eased inside and sagged into a chair.

Sexton's features creased and he shook with another burst of silent laughter. Smouldering with anger, Pat jumped up, threw himself across the room with clenched fists. The Sheriff's

foot shot out. Pat tripped over it in a blind rush and measured his length on the floor.

"Hold your horses, yuh damned wildcat!" spluttered Taylor. "Spill th' beans, Silent, afore I have t' clap him in irons."

PAT GATHERED himself off the floor and eyed Sexton like a baffled bull terrier. The big man pushed back his vest. On his checkered shirt glittered a gold badge, upon which was engraved, "U.S. Marshal."

The bewildered Pat eyed it incredulously. He sank heavily back into his chair.

"Better talk, Sexton," chuckled the Sheriff. "Yuh got Curran tied up in knots."

Sexton laughed. "I keep a watch on yuh, clear yuh, save yore gal, an' yuh crave t' salivate me?"

"But—but May's over th' border. The renegades got her."

"I left th' gal in Antelope Creek tendin' her old man. She got spunk a-plenty. Never batted an eye when the rurales cleaned up the Cats, meanin' rats."

For the first time in two days Pat grinned as if he meant it. His shoulders straightened and his voice lost its flat hopelessness.

"Damnation, Sexton!" he breathed. "I shore had yuh figgered wrong." He swung round on the Sheriff. "How come yuh got th' lowdown on th' Drake killin'?"

"Larry talked plenty—t' th' gal. Guess he reckoned he was as good as spliced an' a wife can't testify against her husband. 'Sides, I picked up his lid at th' Bar-C in yore office."

With puckered brow, Pat reflected upon the amazing switch in his fortunes. A dozen question darted into his mind. He looked at Sexton.

"About Yarrow's killin'," he began.

"Jules Lyman, the kingpin, arranged that."

"Tighman the banker?"

"Shore. He tipped his hand when the Cats staged that faked holdup."

"It's all too doggoned deep for me," said Pat slowly.

"Waal," began the Marshal, gazing reflectively at the ceiling, "Hank here roped me in on this deal. When yore paw was rubbed out, and th' Cats started scratchin', he figgered it wus too big f'r him t' handle. So he burned up th' wires askin' f'r help. I drew th' assignment. When you rode into Buffalo Wells that night I had yuh figgered as a renegade, splittin' th' breeze t' get yore cut.

"Then Yarrow stopped a bushwhack bullet. I knew yore brother rode alone outa Quito th' night before. I followed him at sunup an' drifted into Willow Spring. Even Hank didn't know who I was. I wanted t' give th' valley th' once over first. Waal, Larry's horse paddled and he smoked 'Nigger Joe' tobacco—looked bad for Larry. But I wanted motive. Lyman supplied th' motive about thirty minutes back. He wanted t' run yuh outa th' country."

"Why?" ejaculated Pat. "I never crossed Jules Lyman."

"If'n yuh should make good on th' Bar-C," explained the Marshal patiently. "Jules had t' hand over fifty-thousand cartwheels—he was twenty-thousand short!"

"But—Larry!"

LARRY WAS a bad actor. He drew a thousand for the job an' paid off Yarrow f'r a quirtin' th' old man give him, somethin' t' do with his daughter."

"How come yuh got wise t' Lyman?"

"Th' fake holdup like I said. Remember th' money bags were stuffed with metal blanks? Waal, the side-winder was plenty short on his accounts. He'd been pourin' dinero into some bum copper mines up at Tuscon.

"When Hank didn't rise t' th' bait an' jug yuh f'r Yarrow's killin', an' his pet gunnie, Larry, decorated th' hoosegow, Lyman did some quick

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Letting Brock Tuel know that he was going to Mexico to find proof of the famous Montedura land title was an open invitation to be murdered. But George Almond was not as great a fool as his rashness suggested — he wanted to be certain of the risks, because he needed to be on the alert every moment . . .

NINE DEADLY DEEDS

NOVEL of TWISTED TRAILS

by Lon Williams

GEORGE ALMOND, attorney at law and wealthy mine owner of Ciudad de Leona Vicario, a town which lay in the dust of southern New Mexico, had been reading legal decisions which propounded land law in territories that had belonged to Mexico, but were ceded to the United States in 1848 by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In a court decision respecting a portion of El Rancho Grande del San Xavier appeared a judicial comment which intrigued him

considerably. That comment was as follows: *It does not appear why the young lawyer in his search for proof in support of the Montedura title found it necessary to go to Ojinaga.*

George himself could have explained many things, had he deemed it expedient to do so. In undertaking to prove title for Edesta Montedura to El Rancho Grande del San Xavier—and incidentally his own interest therein—he had anticipated going directly to Chihuahua in Old Mexico, where the



She was a woman scorned, and deadly.

Montedura grant had originated and in whose archives title records were most likely to be found. Though corpses lying in Vicario's streets were still common sights, and wars for land were conducted through gunsmoke almost as frequently as through the tedium of legal processes, dangers of travel had eased off on the stage road southward through El Paso and Juarez to Ciudad de Chihuahua. A few days of leisurely travel should easily have taken him to his destination.

However, there were always preliminaries to be attended to when one was about to undertake even a leisurely journey, especially when circumstances had ruled out travel by stage-coach. Those preliminaries were such as seeing that his horse was shod; that his saddlebags were stocked with emergency tools and extra horseshoes; that

his saddle roll contained blankets for such unforeseen but foreseeable nights when he would be a fugitive in desert places or mountains; that his silver-plated six-guns were in proper working order and plentifully supplied with ammunition against perils too well known not to be regarded with grim feelings.

It was important that his bags contained, among other articles, clean garments; such medicines as were available for convenient packing; bandages which an unlucky bullet might render indispensable; amateur theatrical supplies for impromptu disguises, and an extra-large supply of legal-cap paper. Likewise, that his trousers, vest and coat contained money, quills, gutta-percha ink bottles, maps of New Mexico and Old Mexico's State of Chihuahua, and a very special list of

shady characters and gunslingers who comprised that ruthless gang who wrongfully had held, and were holding possession of El Rancho del San Xavier.

As a deliberately delayed preliminary, Almond stopped by to see Ciudad de Leona Vicario's recorder of land deeds. That official was irreverently known as Stiffy, because his neck bones had become fused together by one of nature's eccentricities, so that when he wished to look from one direction into another he had to turn his whole body. Properly, he was Mr. Jeremiah Crote, whose duties extended to his county as well as to his city, so that he was recorder of land deeds as well as of town ordinances and proclamations.

HE GLARED at George Almond from unfriendly gray-green eyes. "Yes?"

"I have a deed for recording in your land register."

"Leave it," said Stiffy.

"Certainly," said George, "but I shall stand by safely to guard it."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean I would not trust one of Brock Tuel's monkeys in any situation. Of course I'd not leave in your possession this deed to one-half interest in El Rancho Grande del San Xavier."

Stiffy's eyes became gray-green spots encircled by white rings. This exhibition of surprise was succeeded by gray-green lits of craftiness. "You were never one to deal in fancies, Almond, but you've come one this time."

"Indeed?"

"Certainly, sir." Stiffy turned away and placed himself before a writing shelf on which lay a big book. "See for yourself."

"Don't bother," said George. "I know what's there. Nine deeds from as many heirs of Don Filipe Ortez de Basca—falsely reputed to have been original grantee of El Rancho Grande, but whose worthless land was situated

eighty-odd miles northward. Eight of those may be regarded as genuine deeds to something their grantors never owned; one is a forgery. A granddaughter of Don Filipe married a gringo named Oliver Gaston. This stubborn American became devisee of his wife's land interests at her untimely death. He refused to sign a deed to El Rancho Grande del San Xavier, knowing such deed to be fraudulent. In consequence of his stubborn refusal, Tuel had him murdered and his signature forged."

Stiffy stared at George with deep hatred. "Almond, Brock Tuel would hunt you down and kill you, if he knew you'd accused him like this."

"I don't doubt it," said George. "Moreover, you'd help him, if he paid you a little something." He drew a derringer from his vest and toyed with it. "Now, Mr. Crote, you will kindly get busy and record my deed."

"You can't intimidate me, Almond."

"There is, of course, that small matter of a two-hundred dollar shortage in your accounts as trustee of Eliza Maltby's estate."

"How did you... I mean, you're a slanderous scoundrel."

"Must I have you behind bars in order to have my deed copied in your book?"

Stiffy turned, lifted his book and laid it on his flat-topped desk. As he opened a drawer, George reached therein and snatched up Stiffy's loaded forty-five.

"You can't write with this, Mr. Crote, so I'll hold it while you proceed with something more accommodating to your clerical function."

Stiffy scowled murderously but went to work. Once started, he made excellent progress. His quill sped through line after line while his crafty mind forgot its craftiness in favor of neatness and exactitude. George, reading over his shoulder, saw that every recorded word corresponded to its brother in his deed, and that Stiffy

correctly noted on his deed its date and place of recordation.

"Well," he commented and picked up his original document, "that proves that fingers can be artistic, even though their owner has no soul." He put down Stiffy's fee and Crote's forty-five, its cartridges removed.

"You'll pay for this piece of arrogance, Almond."

"It is *you* who'll pay," said George, "if there's further tampering with public books, such as destruction of the Montedura title records."

"Sir, I've never tampered with public books or records."

"Must I prove that, too?"

"Yes, if you think you can."

"Possibly I can," said George. He hesitated then to say what he had made up his mind to say, aware of the danger he was inviting upon himself. "You see, Crote," he declared with reckless purpose, "I'm about to undertake a long journey for this very purpose—to prove that you have destroyed records, that Brock Tuel hired you to do it, and that you and Tuel are blood-stained scoundrels."

Stiffy glanced at his unloaded forty-five. "You better be careful of your words, Almond."

"I'm being most careful. I intend to prove that you are a rascal and that Tuel is a murdering thief. Edesta Montedura, sole surviving heir to her grandfather's estate, has deeded me one-half interest in San Xavier, on condition that I reestablish her title. Day after tomorrow I leave for Ciudad de Chihuahua to satisfy that very condition. This great expanse of land which Brock Tuel claims as his own, by virtue of fraud and murder, was granted originally to Juan Andreo Montedura de Nolandez, as records of this office once showed. His title was never alienated, but descended to his heirs. When I have proof of that, our United States congress will confirm title in Senorita Montedura, this last surviving heir of Juan. She will then

have perfect title to one-half interest and I, to one-half. My job thereafter will be to put you and Tuel behind bars, where both of you should've been long ago."

Stiffy had stared in anger, but anger merged into craftiness. "So you're going to Chihuahua, Mexico?"

George knew Stiffy's thoughts as well as if they had been put into spoken words. He knew, also, what great risk he was assuming. Yet he nodded carelessly. "I start day after tomorrow."

Stiffy smiled with rat-like cunning. "A trip like that, if title records must be searched, will require weeks."

"Months, you mean; possibly years." Then, as a final thrust, he added, "But when I return, it will be up and out for your thieving friend Tuel. You and he might even find yourselves cell mates." George pocketed his deed and restored his derringer to its hiding-place. "Adios, mio impio ladron."

AN HOUR later, George Almond was about to turn into his law office when a man of large, rough proportions stopped him. George looked into a face he knew he should have feared—yet which, because of his own long-smoldering hatred, he foolishly defied. Though of dark complexion, Brock Tuel was thoroughly gringo, his age about forty. His eyes were faded blue, in his left a white blur which marred its appearance, though probably not its vision. His shoulders were broad, his neck large. He wore a short mustache, a tight-fitting vest of checkered gray, a massive belt filled with cartridges, and a six-gun at each hip.

Like many other American adventurers, Tuel had come West following America's defeat of Mexico to take what he wanted. At first he had robbed defenseless Mexicans of their small ranches; afterwards his greedy eyes had fallen upon El Rancho Grande del San Xavier. By then, law

had begun to reach into New Mexico Territory. Legality of seizures had become important; murders less open, and in greater danger of punishment.

Tuel's expression, unsmiling and coldly arrogant, had its own way of speaking. In that expression George had read hatred, joined to intent to commit at least one additional murder.

"Almond, Stiffy Crote tells me you question my right to El Rancho Grande."

This statement contained no surprise. George nodded. "You hear correctly."

"You know what happens to hombres who question my rights, don't you?"

"You murder them," replied George.

"I don't murder them; they have accidents."

"As you say," George returned. "They have accidents, if bullets in men's backs can be called accidents."

"They can." Tuel looked round, observed that they were within plain view of citizens who knew both of them. He then glanced at George's hips. "I'm sorry you ain't armed, Almond. Otherwise, we'd have a settlement."

George nodded toward those who looked on. "I'm confident you'd have a settlement in your own effective and characteristic manner, were there not so many witnesses."

Tuel shrugged his big shoulders. "A time will come," he said, and walked away.

shrugged. Perhaps it was a fatal error, but that was the chance he took. Knowing himself, he knew that he could work best when a danger was a certainty rather than a possibility.

Tuel would have learned about Almond's plans in any event; but so long as George wasn't certain, he was in danger of drifting into a false sense of security—particularly if there were no signs of peril for a long time. Now, he wouldn't be surprised—sure, Tuel might trick and trap him, but Almond now expected anything.

In his office, with doors locked and window shutters closed, George moved his roll-top desk aside, lifted a floor board and exposed a small pit. From this he removed a wooden box. By digging with his hand he uncovered a second box lower down, this one of metal. Into this he dropped his deed, then restored all things to their former places and conditions. He assumed that, during his absence, his office would be vandalized. He also expected that when searchers unearthed his wooden box, they would not think of digging for another beneath it. If he did not return from his journey, it would be another case of nothing lost, nothing gained. Tuel, as usurper, would continue as he was; and Edesta Montedura would continue as owner of something she lacked power to possess. But if he returned, it would be as owner with her of one of New Mexico's finest ranches. His buried deed, he was confident, would be there in its hiding place, waiting to be reclaimed.

Certain of Tuel's intention to have him killed at once, George slipped away that night to an adobe house just west of Ciudad de Leona Vicario where lived a friend. Pedro Sanchez had come to George in time of need and had his neck saved from being pulled out of shape on a false accusation of horse-stealing. Pedro and his wife Maria had proved themselves grateful.

- 2 -



NO ONE WHO knew George Almond would have called him a fool, but now he smiled grimly at the thought that people would change their minds quickly if they knew about his open invitation to be murdered. He

At their place, George remained in hiding two weeks. His fine red horse was called Whitefoot because of its one white front foot—a circumstance known to many observers of horses in and around Vicario. During his two weeks with Pedro and Maria, George gave the white foot a coat of red paint. Other changes affecting identity he made in his own person.

When time for departure arrived, George took one final look at himself in Maria's mirror, with particular attention to his newly-developed mustache. He held a lamp in various positions for varied effects.

"Pedro," he asked with a satisfied feeling, "do I look like anybody you've ever seen?"

Pedro and Maria eyed him thoughtfully. They saw a tall, slender man in his early twenties, unusually handsome, of friendly disposition, but with occasional hints in his dark eyes of swift and ruthless danger.

"Si, senor," said Pedro. "If you will please to not be angry for me to say so, you do look like somebody I once see in Vicario itself. I am dozing half-asleep in front of a store where there is a bench and nobody sitting on it but me, when along he comes, tall like you, and straight, and wearing two guns. His eyes, they shift from right to left, and I think he is looking for somebody, or maybe he thinks somebody is looking for him. Anyhow, I learn afterwards that he is bandido Guillo Musquizata."

"Oh, Pedro!" exclaimed Maria. "For shame, your saying Senor Almond look like a bandido."

"Ah," sighed George, "but that was exactly what I'd hoped he would say. Why should we not look alike? Are we not cousins? My name by adoption is George Almond, yet I am one-fourth Mexican and was christened Alphonse Eca y Musquizata de Fortunato Camino Alamantez."

Maria and Pedro beamed with pleasure.

"But cousins!" exclaimed Pedro. "That I do not know."

"Now for your final report, Pedro. What have you learned while you this last time dozed half-a sleep in Vicario?"

"I have learn much," replied Pedro. "It speaks only danger for you."

"I expected as much."

"But Senor Tuel's men look everywhere for you. They watch all roads. They ask each hombre if he see Senor Almond. 'No, senor,' they say. Nobody see Senor Almond for many days. Nobody see Senor Almond in Vicario. Nobody see him leave Vicario. So they say Senor Almond is hiding in Vicario or somewhere close by. One bad hombre say to me have I see George Almond, and I say to him many times have I see Senor Almond, but for many days I do not see him. I say to him I think Senor Almond have gone away somewhere. He say to me if I see Senor Almond please to let him know, because he is a good friend of Senor Almond. I say to him, 'You bet.'"

"Excellent, amigo," George commented. "From what you have said, it would be unsafe for me to stay longer."

A FEW MINUTES later, he mounted Whitefoot, said goodbye, and quietly rode southwestward. About midnight he turned eastward and by moonlight forded El Rio Grande and headed south. Two hours before dawn, confident that the road south was being watched at critical points, he turned eastward toward Sierra San Andres, where lived several small ranchers whose titles to land he had perfected through congressional confirmation, thus saving them from thieves such as Brock Tuel, as well as from Tuel himself.

Despite his desert course, by daylight he sensed that he was being followed, a feat made easy by plain tracks his horse had left in moonlit sand. He was then far out in that lonely desert of Onate's *jornado del*

muerto. Shortly after noon he reached a rise of ground, cut by wind-scooped arroyos. From its summit he looked westward, found his premonition accurate. Two riders followed his trail.

For several minutes he rode beyond their sight, then he turned back. While still hidden from their view, he had made some changes in his wearing apparel. His pursuers were a mile away when he descended from a rise and rode westward to meet them. What they saw when near enough for a good look at him was a dust-covered, solemn-faced Mexican, by every reasonable guess a bandit.

George Almond drew rein. As he did so, he noted that two pairs of curious eyes glanced at his horse's feet.

"Buenos dias, amigos," George said boldly.

"Yeah, howdy," one of them responded coolly. "We're not looking for any trouble, mister, if that's what you're thinking."

"Excellent!" exclaimed George. He thought of his very secret list of names. He knew that these two were on that list, both of them gunmen who worked for Brock Tuel, one who called himself Kitchell. Kitchell's companion was known as Mathie. Both were lean, deeply tanned, stubbled, hard-eyed.

Kitchell, who showed marks of fair intelligence, studied George shiftily. "Have I seen you somewhere, mister?"

"It is possible," George replied with Mexican accents. "Or possible it is my picture you have seen."

Kitchell and Mathie exchanged wary looks.

Mathie said, "Look, mister, we ain't looking for no trouble with you."

"It is well you know who I am," said George. "Or do you?"

"Sure," said Kitchell. "I'd know Guillo Musquizata anywhere. But we're not after you. We're after a dude—that hombre you met over there beyond them hills."

"Oh, him," said George, tossing a

glance back over his shoulder. "I did not exactly meet him, though I did see him. I said to myself, would he be a deputy-marshal, maybe?"

"He's no officer," Kitchell assured him. "He's a lawyer from Vicario, and it'd please our boss if he was right impolitely shot."

"Indeed?" said George. "Then why do you not right impolitely shoot him?"

"He's heading into country where folks don't especial like us. In fact, they hate Brock Tuel like they hate snakes. What we was thinking is, maybe you'd like to do our job for us."

"You make one great mistake, senors. I do not kill because I hate. I kill for money, and not always for money. Sometimes, you see, men give me their money without being killed."

Kitchell and Mathie exchanged glances.

"Maybe he'd take over for a price," Mathie suggested.

"Ah, indeed," said George. "What price do you offer?"

"Tuel will make it five hundred dollars."

"No, amigo. Guillo do not work for promises. How much can you give me now, as part payment, so to speak?"

"Fifty," said Kitchell.

"I'll make it another fifty," said Mathie. "Tuel can pay us back later."

"A good bargain," said George. "Now tell me, who is this hombre you want Guillo to kill?"

"He calls hisself George Almond, but he's part Mex. His true name is Alphonse something or other."

"De Fortunato," said Mathie.

"Not Alphonse Eca y Musquizata de Fortunato Camino Alamantez?" said George, showing astonishment.

"Yeah, that's him," declared Kitchell.

A terrible frown gathered upon George's excellent forehead. "Ha!" he hissed. "So you would have me murder my dear cousin Alphonse?"

Kitchell and Mathie, sensing death's sudden and unexpected approach, went wildly for their guns. But George's two silver-plated sixguns flashed upward and thundered. Mathie fell from his saddle forthwith, but Kitchell had to be shot twice. George regarded this as unfortunate, too, because Kitchell had put a slug along George's left side, level with his heart.

Both shocked and sickened, George slumped for a minute or so. He had expected to be pursued by Tuel's men, divided into small groups, each pursuer confident of his ability to kill him. George had been equally confident of his ability to surprise them and prove them overconfident. He had not counted on receiving a wound in his very first encounter. His own confidence was shaken.

He was not so badly hurt but what he was able to straighten himself, dismount and appropriate various articles of value, including especially money. His enemies had not been lying; between them they yielded one hundred eleven dollars, a circumstance which indicated their importance in Brock Tuel's ranks of hired killers.

After administering ointment to his gashed, bleeding flesh and tying a bandage around his body, George relieved two unwanted horses of bridles and saddles and shooed them homeward. He thought of burying the corpses, but decided to conserve his strength for more important endeavors. He gave himself a much-needed refresher from a half-pint flask, then mounted Whitefoot and rode eastward again.

His was not a wound that should have worried him greatly, yet he was worried. Premonition added itself to awareness that he had barely escaped death. Premonition seemed to whisper that he had worse times ahead, that death's potential was in his wound, that he had undertaken a journey which he would never complete.

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NATE'S desert was ninety miles long, as it ran north and south parallel to El Rio Grande; George Almond could well understand why Onate's journey that distance had proved to be a journey of the dead. From its

shimmering waste, ghost voices seemed to rise in anguished cries, *Agua! Agua!* Hot winds constantly shifted its sands, gathered particles of dust and assembled them into small clouds that whirled northeastward to dissipate as haze over northern and eastern plains.

Across Jornada del Muerto from west to east, from where George had crossed El Rio, was slightly under forty miles. That distance brought him into Sierra San Andres foothills, to a region of rocks, canyons and gorges where in some long-lost era creeks ran down to join El Rio Grande. An hour before sundown he reached what he'd remembered as small ranch country, a land of huts, of quiet, unoffending ranchers, mostly Mexicans with their cheerful wives and wide-eyed, friendly children.

His canteen was empty. That bullet gash along his left side had begun to pain him. Oozing blood had dried. Need for fresh bandaging was indicated by every twist of his body. He had been wounded before, and he knew that inevitable fever awaited him; already he had begun to feel its parching effects on his tongue and lips.

As he pushed on painfully, he remembered a patch of greenery high on a western slope and what had looked like a cottage, its white walls aglisten in afternoon's blazing sunlight. At last a cry not of anguish, but of relief rose in his throat. *Agua! Agua!* When a high-trail led him under a

ledge to a crystal spring, he swung off his horse and flung himself face-down his full length* and touched his mouth to its cold water. Whitefoot eased forward and drank from a lower pool.

"Wonderful!" George sighed.

When his horse, too, had satisfied his thirst, George sought from a saddlebag his supply of clean cloth. Leisurely he removed his shirt and his stiff bandage, half-sickened at sight of an ugly wound. But it had stopped bleeding and he was confident it would heal, given sufficient time, unattended by further exertion.

He had just finished putting on a fresh bandage when a voice startled him. At first he was uncertain whether it was a human voice or some enchanting sound lifted by winds that swept up from Onate's desert.

It said:

O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being...

George forgot his shirt, his wound, listened enchanted. Soon he was certain that what he heard was a woman's voice—a girl's voice, rather, and that it was filled with strange, lonely sweetness. She was reciting Shelley's ode, *West Wind*. Her voice, rising and lowering, sometimes clear and distinct, then low and distinguishable as hardly more than a whisper, had west-wind qualities.

He heard:

And driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing...

He was amazed at what he regarded as her capacity for memorizing, confident from feeling expressed by her voice, by its moments of speed and grandeur, return to slow, measured moments, extent of variation, over all a sad cry of longing, that she was not reading, but reciting from memory.

Again he heard:

Wild spirit, which art moving everywhere;

Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

GEORGE had risen, his eyes searching. Then he saw her, a lovely girl in white, fifteen or sixteen years of age. She approached with a wooden pail from a higher level and began descent of a flight of crude steps which until then he had not noticed.

Suddenly she stopped. Her lips parted. Upon first sight he had regarded her as an angel descending from heaven. She was fair, her hair finely spun and lighter in color than gold, her eyes blue. At discovery of him she was startled, but oddly not afraid, for her parted lips evolved into a smile which promptly gave way to a look of concern.

"Oh," she said softly.

"I'm glad you're not afraid," said George.

"Should I be?"

"No, indeed," said George, "unless my thinking you're an angel is cause for alarm."

"It could be cause for doubt as to your sanity," said she, smiling again.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I'm George Almond from Ciudad de Leona Vicario, by profession a lawyer, in taste an admirer of all things beautiful."

"And I," said she, "am a perennial candidate for admiration. My name is Jonica Granville. My father is Marsh Granville, Dr. Granville to his former students." She paused and seemed to consider him prosaically for some time. "It is fortunately true, Mr. Almond, that my father knows much about medicine. You should let him examine your wound."

George glanced down at his bandage, aware awkwardly that he still held his shirt in his hands. "Well!" he exclaimed. "Victim of enchantment that I am, I'd completely forgotten this. Excuse me for one second." He

walked round a jutting ledge, put on his shirt and returned feeling less awkward. "Your father is a doctor, did you say?"

"He is a doctor of philosophy, not of medicine—though he knows much about diseases, afflictions, and their treatments. If you will ride on round this ledge a quarter-mile or so, you'll come to a trail which heads back to our cottage."

George regarded Jonica Granville with a critical eye and found her much to his liking. She was not so shy as she was lonely, and he could almost hear her pleading, *Please come—please come*. "Is your father alone?"

"Yes. My mother is dead. Father came West for his health. Fortunately he has income from textbook royalties, hence can live wherever he needs to."

Whether theirs was a temporary residence or one intended to be permanent was to George a question of warm and inviting importance. He asked sincerely, "Do you like living here?"

She looked at him steadily and said without smiling, "Yes, as of now I like it very much."

In her deep earnestness he perceived loneliness and knew instinctively that he should be careful of what he said to her. "I'd like to meet your father, if you're sure I'd be welcome."

"You'd be more than welcome," replied Jonica. "I'll hurry back and tell him that you're coming, also that you're a nice person—and hurt."

"Thanks," said George. He mounted his horse then and rode on round the ledge.

Once more consciousness of pain became acute, reminded him again that his wound could have serious consequences. As he could not go back to Vicario for medical attention, his next best recourse seemed to lie in rest and inactivity for a few days. He would not permit himself to impose upon Granville's hospitality, yet if he could stay there until he was out of

danger from his wound he would gladly pay for his keep. Yes, that would be his proposal.

JONICA and her father were waiting for him when he had made his turn-back and approached their dwelling. Sunset had kindled its golden glow, which mellowed and glorified their expectant faces. Marsh Granville was slender, almost frail with thinness. His features were clean-cut, his sandy hair touched with silver, his countenance grave, questioning.

"Good evening, Mr. Almond," he said. "Alight, please. My daughter has told me about you."

George responded graciously and added, "I hope I'm not intruding, Dr. Granville."

"At our simple cottage you'll be more than welcome."

George swung off and grasped Granville's extended hand. "Your lovely daughter has told me about you, Dr. Granville. Thanks for your kindness. However, I'm a traveler, not a vagabond." He indicated his saddle roll. "As you see, I'm prepared for sleeping outdoors. It happens I'm also prepared to pay for my keep."

"We have a guest room, Almond, and Jonica is a splendid cook. Here, let me take your horse."

"Allow me," said George.

"Both of us, then," said Granville.

Back from Granville's dwelling a narrow pass led into a cove where there was grass. A fence guarded against Whitefoot's escape. A small white mare owned by Granville came up, made friends with Whitefoot and removed any cause for his discontent.

Back at Granville's cottage, George washed from a basin. He then sat with Granville on a small porch that faced westward.

"Jonica tells me you're wounded," said Granville.

"It is only a scratch," said George. "We must attend to it, however."

Preferably now, but certainly when supper is over."

"That will be kind of you," said George. After a while he noticed a telescope or spyglass that lay upon a rustic table. Its presence caused him to look westward, then glance quickly at Granville. "You can see a great distance from here," George said uneasily.

Granville nodded gravely. "Through my telescope, I can see without being seen. Our desert has betrayed many of its secrets."

"You saw me approaching?" George asked.

"I saw you while you were still far away."

"And my two pursuers?"

"Those, also. Naturally I wondered why they trailed you."

"They were under orders to kill me," George said. "And you saw what happened?"

"Clearly," replied Granville. "To me, killings are abhorrent, yet your strategem impressed me."

"I'm no fugitive from justice," George reminded him. "We live in lawless times. I only considered what I should do in self-defense."

"I accept your version," said Granville. "Nor do I question your code of honor. That to one side, you are a lawyer of Vicario, highly respected and, by many, much esteemed."

"You speak as one who might know," said George.

"Until now I'd not had a chance to meet you, Almond. But my Mexican neighbors hereabouts, as well as small ranchers, for many miles around, regard you as their most valued friend. You have done much to secure them in their lands and belongings. My own small ranch was confirmed to its former owner through your efforts. And your fees have been most reasonable."

"I'm grateful for their good-will," said George. "I'd be equally gratified to know it is shared by you."

"I assure you that it is," said Granville.

Following a stir behind them, Jonica appeared. "Supper," she said.

Granville arose and nodded. George got up and accompanied him.

JONICA was, indeed, a fine cook. As a compliment to her art, George ate more than he craved.

His pain had increased. Coffee stimulated him, made his food stay down, but he ate sparingly.

Jonica observed him with anxiety. "You look ill, Mr. Almond."

"Sorry," he said. "It distresses me, too, that I can't do more for this excellent meal."

Jonica glanced at Granville. "Father, we should put him to bed."

"Do finish your supper," George insisted. "My wound is nothing."

Granville and Jonica finished hurriedly. Their table was cleared and George made to lie upon it, his left side upward, his shirt off.

Granville removed George's crude bandages. "Ummm," he mused with disapproval. "Horses and wounds don't go well together. I suppose you know that, Almond?"

George felt heaviness suddenly. "I'm afraid I do," he said.

After a thorough cleansing, Granville applied dilute carbolic acid, washed again, this time in water that had been boiled. After that he applied a fresh cloth. George was sure no doctor could have done better, yet he had an ominous feeling that ministrations had come too late.

A fortnight later, George's wound was apparently healing properly. Yet mysterious, troublesome changes had begun throughout his body. Persistent fever developed. His head ached. Stiffness threatened in his arms and legs. Growth of irritability required constant effort at its concealment. Chills swept through him as mild convulsions.

One evening he started to rise from

a porch chair, when his legs had to be forced into response because of spreading tenseness. Next morning his ailment presented localized symptoms. He had difficulty in swallowing. His face twitched unexpectedly. Tenseness had tightened its grip. He managed to get around until breakfast time, tried to make himself believe that relief would soon come.

He and Granville were sitting on their small porch, watching sunlight spread upon Onate's desert.

Granville noticed that George had covered his eyes, that his head was drawn backward slightly. "Almond, is something wrong?"

George forced his head back to its normal position. "It's passing," he replied, though he knew now that his condition was rapidly worsening.

"After breakfast, I think I'd better resume my journey."

"I won't hear of it," said Granville. "Come inside. You must have hot coffee at once."

George, after painful effort, got up. When he tried to walk, he fell.

"Jonica!" Granville shouted.

She came at a run. "Oh, father, what has happened?"

"He fell," replied Granville. "Help me lift him."

George moved his arms slowly. When they had helped him up, he walked with dragging steps and allowed himself to be put to bed. In bed, his arms and legs straightened themselves as though they had minds of their own.

He looked up at Granville, said with barely moving lips. "You said horses and injuries don't go well together. But my wound had almost healed."

"That's true," Granville replied gravely. "I'd begun to hope that your danger had passed."

"You think I've got lockjaw, don't you?"

Granville nodded sorrowfully. "Almond, I'm afraid so."

To George this was a terrible shock,

though he had lived in fear of it. He had seen animals so afflicted. They lay down because they could not stand. Their jaws locked tight. Their limbs tensed to rigidity, their muscles grew hard. Unless shot by merciful owners, they died in agony.

George said coldly, "Give me one of my guns."

Granville shook his head. "You ask for more than I can give."

"You mean to let me go through this horror?"

"There is no other course, Almond. I'm dreadfully sorry."

"Then let me die as soon as possible."

Jonica slid to her knees and grasped one of his hands. "No, no. Merciful God, let him get well."

Though unable to turn his head, George knew she was crying. He heard her sobs, her entreaties.

She said at last, "Father, can't we find a doctor somewhere?"

Granville replied, "He is beyond a doctor's help."

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GEORGE ALMOND'S mind functioned, though it wandered because of pain and fever. He had sometimes wondered what a man's thoughts were after a bullet had inflicted a mortal blow. Ambitions

died, he had supposed. Desire for material gain of necessity fell away. A man about to die probably thought of those he loved, or words unspoken that urged themselves forward for expression before time was gone.

He thought of Chihuahua, and his thoughts became mixed with feverish imaginings. His mission to Chihuahua was being accomplished in his incoherent dreams. One moment he was

riding straight south. At another time he was examining old records, old documents. Yes, there it was, as experience had told him it would be: A grant from Governor Armijo of Chihuahua to Colonel Juan Andreo Montedura for eight hundred thousand acres, bordered on its eastern extremity by El Rio Grande, on its western flank by Sierra San Xavier; also, legislative confirmation by Chihuahua's legislature, with subsequent confirmation by the legislature of the republic of Mexico.

There was much confusion in his mind. Where was he? Oh, yes, he remembered now. A legendary silver mine was supposedly located on El Rancho Grande del San Xavier. He had ridden many miles south of Chihuahua to Ciudad de Santa Barbara, where mining records were to be found. Ah! Here it was—a map showing the lost mine of Cibola, El Suerte Mina de Cibola, located in mountains of El Rancho Grande.

Later he was in rugged mountains many miles west of Chihuahua at a strange, lonely place called Chantry del Jemancia. Here was a chapel endowed by Juan Andreo Montedura, where family records were to be kept and prayers said for departed Montedura souls as long as time should last. George knew he was at Chantry del Jemancia, because he heard somebody praying. *S o m e b o d y* was praying, *Please, God of Mercy, let him get well.*

Dreams gave way to moments of reality. Hazily he could see Granville and Jonica.

Jonica asked, "What are you doing, father?"

"I'm placing these thin strips of wood in his mouth. Later you will understand why."

George could not move. He could not resist what was being done to him. He wanted to know why it was being done, but he could not ask.

Granville said, "Almond, these

strips will hold your teeth apart. Bite down on them, if you wish."

George could not have done otherwise. His teeth were clamping down in spite of anything he could have done to prevent them. He could hear them crushing into wood. He could hear Jonica's questions, could feel her hands on his face, could hear in his memory her voice as he had first heard it, *O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being.*

Despite swells of misery, he could see her descending a flight of steps, roughly cut in stone. Sweet Jonica, angel of mercy.

Then there were moments when he saw Brock Tuel, heard him saying to his gunmen, *Kill him. He must never reach Chihuahua. Watch every road, every town. Kill him.*

Haze persisted, scenes changed, but obscurity was never complete. Dull, aching consciousness remained of what was going on. Strangeness, of course, hovered about him, gave him a sense of detachment, of being an observer, no longer an actor. He was conscious of night and day, but what transpired through succeeding hours had passed from his hands, occurred independently of his will.

Granville and Jonica awaited developments. They were alone with a man who seemed but a second, a single gasp, from death. Jonica had wept until tears no longer flowed. She and Granville attended him faithfully yet regarded him as darkly unaware of what was said and done.

WITH EYES tired from many hours without sleep, Jonica looked down upon his face. Dimly George could see her. Though his body was helpless from rigidity, his mind was not so strongly bound. He could not think coherently and often his mind wandered into fantasy, yet awareness was with him, his senses of sight and sound still present. When Jonica was above him like this, he

could see her. When she spoke, he heard her voice. Though it sounded far-off, her voice had meaning both in words uttered and inflections and feelings attending them.

She said as hope seemed to fail at last, "Father, I can't give him up."

Granville, unaware that George was conscious, replied sternly, "Don't tell me you've fallen in love with him."

"But I have. From that first meeting, I've loved him. He was someone who had come to me out of wind and sun and desert. Of course he cared nothing for me, but he might have done so—in time."

"I know what you're thinking," said Granville sadly. "I'm glad he was fair enough not to make love to you. You will remember him, yet you won't have to remember him with a broken heart."

"But, father, isn't there anything—anything at all—we can do for him?"

Granville felt of Almond's arms, legs, body. Their rigidity was frightening. "Jonica," he said thoughtfully, "I've had in mind all along one desperate recourse. It explains why I placed those strips of wood in his mouth."

"Please go on."

"It may strike you as an absurdity," said Granville. "It may prove to be so. I have seen it tried only once. When I was a small boy on my father's farm, I had a pig. It was a pet. When it had grown to a sizeable shoat, it got cut on a nail. Several days later it was down on its side, its jaws locked, its legs and body rigid. My father tried a remedy. A desperate one it was, too. So far as I know, it was entirely his own idea."

"Do hurry, father. Seconds now mean so much"

"If I try it here, I'll need your help."

"I'll help, gladly."

"You only think so. It won't be easy

to take. Indeed, it will wring your heart out."

"But do hurry. Give me a chance to show you I can help."

Granville left and returned with a flat chisel and a screwdriver. "My father used something like these. By patient and, I must say, ruthless effort, he pried my hog's mouth open. We could hear what seemed to be muscles tearing. Yet my father didn't stop at that. He kept prying until the hog's mouth had fully opened and the tearing sounds had ceased. Then the incredible occurred. Within an hour after his desperate remedy had been applied, I had my hog again. He was up, eating corn."

Jonica hid her face. A terrible decision confronted her. Sobs indicated great depths of agony. But at last she whispered, "Let's try it anyway."

"You will hold his head then," said Granville. "It will take all your courage. Once we've started, we must not stop."

Jonica moved behind their cot and took hold. She held on tightly while Granville forced chisel and screwdriver into position from opposite sides of George's mouth. George, conscious of everything they did, was powerless to object or assent, or even to let his awareness be known. What they did, he had to endure.

When Granville's instruments were in position, he used them as levers. Force he applied slowly, but with determined and relentless purpose. As George's mouth was slowly pried open, those tearing sounds Granville had mentioned began to be heard. Though sickened and horrified by what he was doing, Granville went on ruthlessly. More and more he pried. George, unable to cry out, was left to his only recourse, a recourse over which he had no control. Tears flowed and formed pools in his eyes. Perspiration beaded and ran down his face.

Then appeared what seemed a miracle. Slowly tenseness relaxed its terrific hold. George's eyes moved; his

mouth closed, slowly opened again. Minutes later he moved his arms and legs.

Granville looked at Jonica, in whose face was glory.

George heard their voices distinctly and with complete understanding.

Granville said, "I don't know, my child. It might have been better otherwise."

Jonica dried tears from Almond's eyes. "Never say that, father, nor ever think it again. What we have saved, we can never lose."

A WEEK LATER, George Almond and Jonica were together at Granville's spring, where they had first met. Jonica stood before him, her face downcast so that she saw only his riding boots.

"George, must you go so soon?"

He held his horse's reins. Whitefoot, young, reinvigorated by good pasture, was restless. He had satisfied his thirst at a nearby pool. A hoof pawed impatiently.

George said, "It has been almost a month since we met at this spot. My departure has not been soon, but long delayed."

"Every moment of your stay has been and will be cherished."

George wanted to be practical, felt that he must be. "Your father refused to let me pay board, but I left something for you in a jar on your kitchen shelf."

Her eyes lifted in rebuke. "You shouldn't have done that. You were our guest, not our boarder."

George kicked uncomfortably at a stone. "I know. Your kindness could have no equal. But... Well, please treat what I left as a present. Think of it as such, though it happens to be money."

Jonica had an exciting idea. "I'll save it for you, George. You will come back to see us, won't you?"

She was looking at him then, her expression one of eager expectancy.

Sometimes she had seemed like a child, at other times a woman. Though he had never regarded himself as competent to judge such matters, he thought of her as at that unhappy age which lay between childhood and womanhood, when a young woman's mind was confused and made wretched by mixtures of love and bewilderment, hope and desperation, dreams and uncertainty.

He asked, what inner warnings advised against, "Would you like for me to come back?"

For a while she gave no answer. Then she caught his hand. "Come over here and let's sit down."

He followed willingly, yet knowing he should have been plain with her. When they were seated on a ledge he said, "I've never sat by one more lovely."

Jonica nodded westward. "Look out there," she said. "What you see is desert, a land of waste and loneliness, where sands drift in winds that are never still."

George himself felt the loneliness that must have been in her heart. "Go on, Jonica."

"When I come down for water, I nearly always sit here and dream. That is, I used to. In my dreams I could often see a man riding out there. As you know by now, my head is filled with books, romance, poetry, stories of chivalry. It has been easy for me to visualize some gallant figure riding my way to imagine his heart was free except for his own dream, and that when he came he would find me to be his dream come true."

"But always it has been only a shadow. My gallant knight vanished before my eyes, carried away on winds that had brought him. Yet hope gave life to new visions. When one vanished, another appeared in its place, so that hope fed upon what it created, ghosts though they were. Until you came. Now there are no more desert shadows to enchant and deceive. I

fear there can never be again. You see, you came. You were real. You were a gallant knight. You came with a dream in your heart. But I—I was not your dream come true. Oh, George!"

Suddenly she hid her face in her hands. A sob, a hurt cry, escaped her lips. Determined at last to be firm with her, he caught her hands and made her look at him. "You do me tremendous honor, Jonica. Perhaps I failed to emphasize sufficiently that I must go to Chihuahua. Forgive me, if I have been a deceiver."

SHE SHOOK her head slowly. "You haven't deceived me. I know what you must do. It has been made clear enough, also, that you may never return. You have challenged fate, and there can be no turning back." She looked westward again. "What will I see out there when again I search in my loneliness? Will it be only a shadow? Oh, no. It will be you. Every day, when winds blow shifting sands across Jornada del Muerto, a man will come riding in my dream. He will be no longer just a man, some handsome stranger created in varying forms; he will hereafter be someone I have known. You are going to be gone a long time, possibly forever. Yet I shall often see you, as West Wind's fleeting shadow, as an undying vision of love's young dream."

George had never been more wretched. He refused to let himself believe that he was in love with this girl, refused as a man faced by storm told himself that no storm existed. "You are young," he said. "Love's young hurts are healed gently by time. When your father's health has improved, you will be going back East. I shall not be a shadow to you then, but only a memory, one that will become vague, at last as something that never was."

She faced him frankly, but with a deeply injured expression. "You know

that is not true, don't you? You know that wherever I go, you will go with me as a memory that can never die." When he did not answer her, she said, "You think I'm forward, don't you?"

"I think you are sweet and wonderful."

"It was because I had to speak to you like this. You, with your feeling of uncertainty about your future, would not speak. You are pledged to a task. From that pledge you will not be turned aside, even for love. But, George?"

He saddened then, sensing that their parting was near. "Yes, Jonica?"

"Will you kiss me goodbye?"

He slid from their ledge and stood before her. "I'd meant to ask if you'd grant me that privilege."

"And I was forward still," she said in self-approach. "Yet I was afraid you wouldn't ask. Anyhow, when you have kissed me, I'm going to close my eyes and keep them closed until you are gone. Please promise that you won't look back."

"It's a promise."

He kissed her tenderly, and with heartache. Only death could still his longing to come back to her.

"Goodby, sweet dream," she said, her eyes closed.

"Goodby, my dearest friend."

He mounted his horse and, as he rode away, did not look back. Yet his heart was heavy with a force that pulled backward, a regret which troubled and had no satisfying explanation. Why should he continue a journey so certain to confront him with continued danger, so uncertain as to its final success? And if he should succeed, would that success be what he wanted?

Practical thoughts returned before he had gone far. Steadfastness of purpose had been one of his guiding principles. Moreover, Jonica had understood his situation clearly. He had challenged fate. Brock Tuel was determined to kill him, whether he gave

up his mission or went onward. George had no honorable choice but to go on.

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AT A JUNCTION of mountain trails Marsh Granville, worried and anxious, stood beside his saddled mare. He raised a hand for George to stop. "I'd like a final word with you, Almond."

George Almond swung down. "As many words as you like, Dr. Granville. Remember, so long as I have life I shall be at your service."

"That I firmly believe," Granville responded. "But your life may be short unless you are extremely careful."

"I could hardly be more careful than is my present wish."

"It's good to hear that. But let me be specific. Some minutes ago, Sebastian Martinez came to see me. He is a sheepman hereabouts, with a good wife, five children, and many sheep. It may interest you to know that men of these mountains have been secretly guarding my place since you came there. News travels fast among them. Day before yesterday Martinez was in Vicario and heard news. Brock Tuel has offered a reward for you, dead or alive."

"On what ground?"

"Two of his men were found dead out there." Granville nodded westward.

"Those two I killed, I presume?" said George without distress.

"Yes," replied Granville. "Tuel's story is that they were murdered—dry-gulched I believe was his word for it."

"He could not have known how they met their deaths."

"Apparently that is of no consequence, Almond. According to Martinez, Tuel is determined upon your death. Martinez did not not know why, except in some vague sort of way. You know why, of course. Tuel can't afford not to kill you. From other sources I've heard that Tuel has been in person to Chihuahua in search of you. As you had not been in Chihuahua, he is convinced that you are in hiding somewhere this side of Juarez. Every road is being watched. Gunmen are in every town, with orders to kill you."

George found this to be more news than he could readily digest. He considered his situation gloomily, said absently, "What would you suggest I do?"

"Stay with Jonica and me a while longer," Granville replied promptly. "Tuel's men are afraid to come into Sierra San Andres. Some of his most effective killers have died in these mountains. It's well known that Tuel himself barely escaped from this region a few years ago. He's not likely to come back."

George knew his peril, how apparently impossible were those odds set against him. But there was another risk. As a lawyer, he knew human frailties. Some shepherd, despite hatred for Tuel, could become a betrayer through temptation. Moreover, his further stay might bring danger to Granville and Jonica.

George said at last, "Dr. Granville, your generosity is surpassed only by indebtedness and gratitude to you that I owe. Dangers you warn me against make me feel terribly weak and inadequate. Yet they are risks I assumed when I began this journey. Truth is, I fear I deliberately invited them."

Granville regarded him with astonishment. "Incredible! Why should you invite men to kill you?"

"It was rashness, I admit," George replied. "From a purely personal

standpoint, it's no great mystery." He explained his reasons, then added, "I have a list of Tuel's men. They have killed many of my friends. I hoped they would pursue me, in order that I could kill them off, one by one. Such would, I thought, serve a double purpose: It would avenge my lost friends; it would also make it easier to gain possession of El Rancho Grande del San Xavier, once title had been proved."

"Such audacity is outside my world," said Granville, shaking his head.

"It should've been out of mine," said George. "Nevertheless, it had its strong points. I thought that if Tuel and his men pursued me enmasse, I could readily elude them. If they came singly, or by two's, I was confident I could turn on them and kill them. Indeed, I've marked two of them off my list already. Let us suppose that finally I am pursued by Tuel himself, unassisted. Can you imagine a desert scene where Tuel and I have come face to face with each other?"

Again Granville shook his head slowly. "Western ways to justice are foreign to me, Almond. In that hypothetical situation you mention, let me wish you luck."

"Thanks again," said George. He swung onto his horse. "Let's hope we meet again."

Granville indicated one of George's six-guns. "From what I saw through my telescope, I'm convinced you're no novice with guns."

George nodded. "One of my brothers was killed—murdered by a gunman when I was twelve. I resolved then never to let that happen to me. I became an expert." George indicated his weapons. "If I may brag a little, I do right well with these."

"If I understand Western ways correctly, you will not put them aside until Tuel is dead, or you yourself..."

"Fate will determine which," said George.

"One other thing," said Granville. "There's still another danger."

George held Whitefoot at uneasy mooring. "My courage is limited, Dr. Granville."

"Yes, it should be. Yet I must warn you. On your way south, if you follow this mountain trail, you will pass through forbidden country. These Mexicans know what awaits you. It is because I have their confidence that they have told me this and asked me to warn you, whom they regard as their friend. Almond, have you heard of a bandit named Guillo Musquizata?"

GEORGE concealed his emotions. "Who hasn't?"

"None, I suppose," said Granville. "He's something of a legend. Anyhow, at a place known to Mexicans as El Preferencia del Diablo, or Devil's Choice, your trail will split. One would take you down into Onate's desert toward Casca Springs; one, to Guillo Musquizata's hideout. You will face a difficult decision."

"You're not exaggerating my dilemma," said George, aware of prospects that steadfastly darkened. "Anything else?"

"Only this," said Granville. He held up his hand. As George grasped it, he said, "As your Spanish kinsmen would say, *Adios, y irse con Dios.*"

"Goodby to you and yours," said George. "I shall hold both of you in my heart forever."

Once more he rode off without a backward look, though not without many backward thoughts.

Shortly after noon he reached a cove where water seeped from beneath a cliff to form a pool. There he ate a lunch which Jonica had prepared for him. There, also, he allowed Whitefoot to graze for an hour.

Afternoon was near its close when he reached El Preferencia del Diablo.

Already he had come to a decision. Of his cousin Guillo he had heard much, especially respecting his audacity and his loyalty to friends. To ride into Guillo's country involved risk. Yet risk beset him elsewhere, too. In Guillo there was possibility of help. Acting upon what he considered a favorable choice between dangers, he turned left into Guillo Musquizata's forbidden country.

His trail was tortuous, through wilderness, past cliffs and precipices, over notched ridges where deadly ambushes could have been laid.

Then, minutes before sunset, a voice called down from a jumble of rocks. "Ah, my handsome stranger! How sad it is that you have chosen to die so young."

For seconds George held his breath, then he exhaled slowly. Slightly above him and but a few feet from him, a dark eye peered along a rifle barrel. Yet by recourse to intellect instead of fear, George found inspiration.

"Guillo!" he cried with forced accents of pleasure. "My own dear cousin! But of course you would not shoot your cousin Alphonse Musquizata Alamantez, christened Alphonse Eca y Musquizata de Fortunato Camino. I have come to visit you, my cousin."

A head lifted. Dark eyes peered down, suspicious, uncertain. Presently a thin mustache spread, as lips smiled. "Not my own dear cousin Alphonse from Vicario?"

"None other, Guillo."

"Of course, Alphonse. Tell me more about yourself. With a price on my poor head, I do not trust even my own cousin until I know him better."

"There's a price on my head, too, Guillo. So that makes us even."

"Ah, then you are welcome, Alphonse. I know what an unhappy lot it is to be a fugitive. We have much to talk about. Come, amigo."

Guillo lifted his rifle and turned its muzzle away from George. He disap-

peared but later reappeared mounted on a magnificent black horse, its saddle and bridle bright with silver. He motioned for George to follow.

George gave Whitefoot a spur and soon caught up with his cousin.

"I've heard much about my cousin Guillo," George said. "Despite your reputation as an adventurer, you are liked by many."

Guillo's face reflected pleasure as well as sunset's glow. Yet his mind was occupied with study of his newly-found cousin. "You ride a splendid horse, amigo."

"Only your black is better," declared George.

"And those guns you carry," said Guillo. "They become you handsomely."

"They have their good points," said George.

"And you are most handsome yourself, my cousin. Yet it grieves me that you have become a fugitive. What have men against you, amigo?"

"I should say, it is a conflict of interest," said George.

"Ah, it is always so."

THEIR TRAIL wound among rocks, beneath occasional pines and came soon to a spring, beside it a small log cabin with its front porch. At a hitch-rail they stopped.

"A lovely place," said George. He followed Guillo's example and swung down. "From all appearances, I'd say it's a place of peace."

Guillo sighed. "Only half do you see as yet, my cousin." He hitched his horse and nodded to indicate that George should do likewise. Then he called, "Catalina, my love, come see."

George had already observed movement within Guillo's cabin. In answer to Guillo's summons, a slender girl of extraordinary charm and loveliness of face and figure appeared before them.

"Si, Senor Musquizata, mio caballero, quien es?" Eyes of beauty, guile and subtle interest lowered and rested upon George.

Guillo, handsome and tall himself, was hardly a match for his cousin. Though he probably recognized as much, he bowed graciously. "Ah, dear one, this is my sweet cousin from Vicario. He is Alphonse Eca y Musquizata de Fortunato Camino Alamantez."

Catalina, dressed in scarlet and much jewelry, feigned a coldness George suspected she did not feel. She now spoke in perfect English, which fact suggested to George that she had come of high family. "Indeed?" she said. "And why does your cousin come here?"

"That," replied Guillo, "is for my kinsman to explain in his own time and in his own way. For now it is enough that he is our guest."

"Guillo's guest, you mean," Catalina reminded him coolly. "But Guillo's cousin—that is something else."

"You are, indeed, most gracious," George said with a polite nod.

"Now, my cousin," said Guillo, "we shall let our horses graze. Tonight you will be Guillo's cherished visitor." As they led their horses to a small fenced pasture, Guillo continued hospitably, "I think often of my relatives. It is then I ask myself, did they ever make a mistake? Why is it they live in polite society, honored and respected, while I, Guillo, must live in hiding in Sierra San Andres, not knowing when I shall be betrayed? That I ask myself. But I trust you, Alphonse. You would not betray Guillo."

"Your confidence will not be violated," said George.

When they had returned to Guillo's porch, George said, "You knew I was coming here, didn't you, Guillo?"

Guillo shifted his twin forty-fives to make himself more comfortable. "Guillo knows who comes and goes."

"Then you do have friends," said George. "You are to be envied."

"Guillo has friends," George's cousin responded simply. "He also has enemies."

While they waited for Catalina to prepare food, George explained his mission and brought Guillo up to date on what had happened. "I came to you, Guillo, because I believed you would welcome my coming. Then, too, I thought you might be willing to direct me by some secret route into Old Mexico, thence to Chihuahua. Brock Tuel's men are watching roads they think I'd most likely follow."

Catalina, lamp in hand, appeared then. Both men rose. She said inhospitably, "What is politely called dinner, is served."

Darkly challenging eyes rested for an instant upon George. Instinct and intellect combined then to warn him he might not be so safe here as he had hoped.

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T MIDNIGHT, George Almond lay silent in his blankets. He had declined indoor hospitality, had made his bed under a small pine a hundred yards from Guillo's cabin, had slept through troubled

dreams until sound awoke him.

He listened, certain that some creature was near. His right hand went quietly to one of his six-guns. His eyes roved searchingly. Stars sparkled in a clear sky, but their light fell feebly upon mountains, crags, trees, rocks. A cougar could have crept close, yet remained unseen.

A woman's voice called softly, "Alphonse!"

He sat up, alarmed. A cougar's presence would have been less disturbing. "Who are you?" he demanded sharply.

"It is I, Catalina. Please, Alphonse, do not make noise."

Darkly she emerged from her screen

of shrubbery and drifted toward him, her robe swinging loosely, her treacherous beauty alive in George's angry thoughts.

He sprang erect. "Catalina, go back where you belong."

Soon she was close. "Do not speak so loudly, handsome one. Would you betray poor Catalina to her bandido husband? Please, Alphonse, give me one happy moment, that I may remember it always."

"Do you think me so base as to violate my cousin's confidence?" George stormed.

"Your cousin means little to me," returned Catalina, pressing herself closer to him. "But you... Oh, Alphonse, you slept so peacefully. For ever so long did I listen, but your sleep was without sound. How sweetly I could love you. Come, do not deny Catalina her moment of incomparable memory."

Her nearness and softness maddened him, yet in furious anger he pushed her away. "Shameless woman! Would you betray your protector? Go back to him."

"Protest becomes you so wonderfully, Alphonse."

"I'm not protesting; I'm telling you."

"Yet you are human. You are one who protests, yet knows protest is vain. Still, caballero, though you feel you should reject my love, surely you would not deny me a helping hand. I must leave this place. Guillo has been good to me, yet I do not love him. Once I thought I loved him. Wayward I was, defiant of my parents, thirsty for what I believed was happiness, ready, even eager to flee with a man who defied his enemies, committed robberies most audaciously, rode his grand black horse, and laughed at danger. But my infatuation is over. I would like to go back, Alphonse, but I cannot go alone."

"Then ask Guillo to take you."

She was silent, thinking. George could hear her breathing softly. Some-

how she had managed to draw close to him again.

"My gallant Alphonse, you are one who seeks fortune. I overheard you talking with Guillo about your journey to Chihuahua. Your name, Alphonse—words in it mean *fortunate road*. Musquizata del Fortunato Camino, do you not realize that fortune is in your very hands? What could we not do, if we would but close our hands upon it?"

George was appalled suddenly. "Are you suggesting that we betray Guillo for reward money?"

She appeared to recoil slightly, but she did not retreat. "Let us not speak of betrayal. Rather, let us speak of justice. Is it not time that he paid for his crimes? With Guillo dead, or in prison, think of how many lives might thus be saved. Is it not sometimes one's duty, Alphonse?"

George bent and began to roll his bed. "I shall listen to you no longer. Indeed, I should strangle you. If Guillo does that very thing, it will serve you right." He lifted his roll with an intention to leave her, but he hesitated when suddenly she drew a small gun from beneath her robe.

"Then I shall kill you," she cried. "I shall tell Guillo that you sought to violate his beloved, that I killed you to save my honor."

George leaped forward and enveloped her gunhand within his bedding. A muffled sound followed, and a bullet cut its way through to pass close to his face. In his violence of self-protection, George flung her backward, her hand robbed of its weapon. She fell, and her head struck hard against a stone. She was stunned into insensibility.

IN COLD fear, George Almond carried his bed roll down to where his horse had been put for night's safety. Proceeding by memory of places and relationships, aided feebly by starlight, he found and saddled his horse. With as much precision as haste would per-

mit, he fastened his bedding and saddlebags in place and seized Whitefoot's reins.

As he turned, a tall, straight figure blocked his path. "Why does my dear, sweet cousin leave so abruptly?"

George gasped in surprise and stark terror. "Guillo!"

"Si, my cousin, it is Guillo. You hurt Guillo very much when you leave his hospitality, like a thief who has stolen something of great value."

"I have stolen nothing," declared George, his eyes on Guillo's dark guns. He wondered when Guillo's hands would snap down and up and blast him into eternity. But with each moment, as surprise wore off, his fear diminished. As fear decreased, resolution was reborn. He had his own guns. He hoped that Guillo was not so reckless as to gamble with both of their lives.

Instead of drawing, Guillo stooped and picked up a slender bundle of sticks which smelled of rich pine. He touched a match to its splinters and a torch soon burned with its yellow, smoking flame. "Guillo's hospitality is not so easily forfeited, Alphonse, my kinsman. With this torch I give you safe passage. Since you are resolved to flee by night, carry this with you. Any friend of mine who sees it will let you pass unharmed. Go back to El Preferencia del Diablo and turn left. From my country you will ride down into Senor Tuel's country. Adios, mio amigo."

George, incredulous, swung onto his horse. He received Guillo's torch and, holding it aloft, rode away. Every second he expected a bullet in his back, but within less than a minute he had ridden over a rise and downward out of sight on its western side.

A sigh escaped his lips. For a moment he was unsure whether this was reality, or mere fantasy. Chihuahua seemed non-existent. Even when certain he was not captive to some weird enchantment, he sensed his kinship with timid souls who faltered under

difficulty and in desperation turned back.

At Devil's Choice, however, courage reasserted itself. He turned left, as Guillo had directed. By dawn he was down in desert country, his torch of safe passage cast aside. What Guillo might do, still troubled him. He had done Guillo no wrong, but did Guillo know that? There was possibility that his cousin, roused by jealousy if not an urge to vengeance, might betray his whereabouts to Brock Tuel, or to some of Tuel's gunmen.

Mindful of certain needed supplies, George considered whether to seek out a town and risk encounter with his enemies. At noon he ate an uncooked lunch in barren terrain and drank from his half-empty canteen. His horse had neither drink nor food. Southwestward lay El Rio Grande, vegetation and water. At mid-afternoon he was on its eastern bank. At sunset he rode into Casca Springs, a town supported by stockmen and by miners from a nearby silver mine. Whitefoot was lodged at a livery barn.

George found shelter and food for himself at a hotel called Posado Bernado. After supper he was about to return to his room, when a blonde woman in red ruffles and lace, with somber blue eyes and a doll-like face stared beseechingly at him.

"Forgive me," she said in a voice full of music, "but I can see you are kind. Would you help me? I'm a singer at Arglasse's and I'm due there in about two minutes. Yet I'm afraid to venture out alone. Arglasse promised to send for me, but his escort has not come."

George regarded her discreetly. She was pretty, and demureness became her remarkably. Yet her pose was one that seemed to lack something. Her manner was not truly warm, but only one assumed for self-serving purposes.

"What is Arglasse's, Senorita?"

"To answer is to feel shame. It is a drinking, gambling place. However, I do not mingle with guests. I sing and,

of course, parade myself on a stage. Otherwise my life is my own. Of course if you do not wish to see me safely across, I can but venture out alone."

"My humble apology," said George. "I must be very slow of comprehension. Allow me."

HE OFFERED his arm, an offer promptly accepted, and they went out. From Posado Bernado to Arglasse's Saloon and Gambling Emporium was but a short distance and included crossing Casca's main street. Horses were hitched at many spots, riders passed at canters, and men clanked along boardwalks and graveled paths.

As his companion clung tightly to his arm, she reminded him invitingly, "You did not ask my name. I happened to know yours, however. You are George Almond."

George halted abruptly. A passing horse filled their faces with dust. "How did you know that?" he asked sharply.

"Did I not see you once in Ciudad de Leona Vicario? Ha! You are handsome, Mr. Almond. A lady would not soon forget. And I... Well, if you care to know?"

He started on. "I do."

"Thank you. I am Consuella Duffield. As might well have been expected in such places as this, I'm called Duffy. Now, if you're not afraid of alleys, I always enter at a side door so that I will not be seen until my stage appearance."

George escorted her according to her wish. Instinct warned him that he was being lured into a trap, and sight of movement in half-light ahead added to his alarm. When they had reached a pair of steps, he glanced back. Two men who had appeared between them and a street lamp cast long shadows at their feet.

Concluding that he had been tricked, furious at himself at having been so easily fooled, George urged his supposed betrayer upward and through a

doorway. When she had entered, she made an effort to close him out.

"A brave effort," he reminded her, murder in his accents. He slid a door bolt which she had intended to slide and thus fasten him out to be killed. "You had never seen me before tonight. Some scoundrel pointed me out to you, told you enough about me to make your treachery appear innocent. You feline!"

She was drawing fearfully away from him. "You are so wrong, Mr. Almond. I had seen you before, as I told you. I had expected an escort. His coming was prevented, by whom I do not know. In asking for your protection, I did not realize there was danger to you."

"Why did you try to fasten me out?"

"It was only from habit. So often am I pursued by drunken admirers that I forgot you were not one of them. Please forgive."

His anger wavered. "Let it be as it is. Do I understand that you are to sing?"

A stranger appeared, possibly Arglasse himself, an elegant person in any event.

"Miss Duffield, you are late. Come at once."

She smiled unhappily at George and disappeared beyond a side curtain.

Briefly George waited. A piano began to play. Several measures later Duffy began to sing.

GEORGE sought a way of escape, certain he could not return as he had come. Down below he made out a long bar and a floor filled with tables, at some of which men talked idly, while card games were in progress at others. He saw no one he recalled having seen before. With an air of casualness, he moved down and strode along a wall, his eye glancing frequently at a pair of swinging doors which connected with Casca's open spaces.

He was almost there when a well-dressed stranger who had sat alone at a table rose abruptly and blocked his

path. "Pardon, sir," he said, smiling. "I am one of Arglass's official welcomers. Won't you sit with me and enjoy a moment's diversion?"

George, though uneasy, every moment expecting violence, sat down.

"Your name, if I may ask?"

"Liddell. Rumford Liddell. You are..."

"Carlos Montez," responded George.

"A pleasure," Liddell assured him.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Later," said George.

His attention shifted to Consuella Duffield, whose song had evolved into a song and dance act, one that revealed her slim legs as well as her melody.

During that brief diversion a group of men had entered at his right. They now surrounded his table. Four of them seated themselves, while three stood at George's back.

"How about a game, stranger?" one of them said directly to George.

George's breathing had slowed. Tuel's men were all about him and Rumford Liddell was gone. These men were rough, vicious looking characters who eyed him with snarling amusement. They had him now for certain; he read their assurance in every face and eye.

"A game is quite in my line," George responded with bold, angry recklessness.

Cards were immediately produced.

George had no illusions as to how they intended their game to end. He would be allowed to win, then suddenly one of his enemies would accuse him of having cheated. Immediately he would be gunned down, and his mission to Chihuahua would be ended, ingloriously and finally.

He played to lose, rather than to win. Yet he won anyhow.

Then a bystander at his left reached down. "Sorry, stranger, but you dropped an ace." He came up with an ace of hearts and laid it in front of George. "I think it slipped out of your sleeve, mister."

That was their signal. He had not

known *how* it would come, yet even its lack of novelty did not prevent his being unnerved for an instant. As hostile, predatory eyes bored into him, however, fierce anger gave him resolution. His opposite number was first to move. But George moved, too. He rose and shoved backward, so that none of his enemies stood immediately behind him. His guns roared. Yet what occurred within little more than a second literally appalled him. Men fell before him faster than his guns could speak and in no time Tuel's seven gunmen lay dead. To his surprise he was alive and unscathed.

"Very nice work, my excellent stranger," a voice said softly.

George whirled, his mouth opened. His cousin Guillo stood a little to one side and calmly reloaded his two guns. Just in time George remembered that Guillo was a wanted man. Hence, he restrained what would otherwise have been a joyous greeting.

"Stranger," he said, "I owe you my life."

"These hombres, they try to murder you, amigo."

"But for your timely help, they would have succeeded too well," said George, sweating.

Guillo nodded at George's hot guns. "Reload them, amigo. Never let yourself be caught with unloaded guns."

George acted promptly and regarded his promptness as most fortunate. Spectators were growing restless. Appearance of a deputy sheriff would have converted them into a posse. At any moment they might have converted themselves into a mob.

"Shall we have a drink?" George asked Guillo.

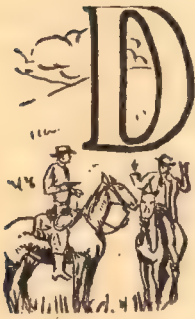
"Later," replied Guillo. "Just now I think we call a deputy, or maybe an undertaker."

At a nod George followed his cousin and they went out. "My kinsman is resourceful," George commented, "but it is my opinion we should depart without delay."

"Your wisdom is above question," returned Guillo. "While you claim what is yours at Posado Bernado, I shall bring your horse. A back-door departure would be best. Adios for now, dear cousin."

A few minutes later, obscured by night, they rode leisurely southward. To George, time and distance were momentarily unimportant. His thoughts and feelings were those of a man who had been marked for death. He understood now why such a man could so easily be driven to remorseless revenge. He was dangerously near that mental and physical condition himself. In his opinion, it was not an experience to be desired.

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DURING most of that night, George Almond and his cousin pushed on southward and southeastward. At daylight they halted in rough country, screened by small pines. Guillo had guided them to this spot out of respect for its seclusion, water seepage, rock-basins of water, and sparse graze land.

"Again my cousin is my guest," Guillo said unsmilingly as he swung off his tired horse.

George dismounted. "You put it generously," he said. "It is pleasant to hear your voice again, after so many hours of silence."

"Sometimes one must think," returned Guillo.

George unsaddled Whitefoot and cast about for grass. "You can think speedily when it's necessary, Guillo. But why do you again regard me as your guest?"

"We are again in Guillo's country. More than once I come here for rest. It is quiet here, amigo. Here, let me

take your horse. With my rope I make a fence."

George surrendered Whitefoot. Meanwhile he set fear to rest by observing that Guillo likewise had unsaddled his horse, also left his belongings behind.

"We're short of food," George commented, when Guillo had returned. "I had intended to replenish my supplies in Casca Springs."

Guillo bent over his saddlebags. "When you have traveled as much as I, you will know to make that your first concern when you ride into town, especially when it is so certain that you will leave in one big hurry." He brought to light bacon, bread and tins of assorted foods. "Now we make a fire, but a real small one."

When they had eaten, George covered their fire. "Do you ever sleep, Guillo?"

"At night, yes. By day, no."

George sat down and reclined against a ledge. Since that massacre of Tuel's seven men at Arglass's in Casca Springs, Guillo had passed up several opportunities to speak of his beautiful and traitorous Catalina. During their flight, he had often looked back, sometimes had stopped to listen. His remarks, however, had related to their destination, or hideout, in Sierra San Andres' southernmost foothills. That Guillo's mood was not good, was self-evident.

"You no longer trust your cousin, do you, Guillo?" George asked abruptly.

Guillo had been peering downward through pines to stretches of barren country, possibly for signs of pursuit. "You mistake me for what I am thinking," he answered tonelessly.

"Possibly," said George, "but not for what you are thinking about."

Guillo swung round. "You know what I am thinking about?"

"Being human, yes."

"Then you know my thoughts are not happy ones."

"My thoughts, too, are troubled, Cousin Guillo. Without meaning to do so, I broke up your happiness. If I had turned right at El Preferencia del Diablo, instead of left. . ."

"You would have been dead, Alphonse," said Guillo. "And I—I would have been living in constant danger of having my throat cut or of receiving a bullet in my brain. You came to me. How else would I have discovered that my beautiful Catalina was a traitor?" Later he said, "Permit me to tell you about my lovely Catalina."

"Proceed," George insisted.

"I found her in a dance place in Chihuahua," Guillo continued unhappily. "She made eyes at me. What did she want? I did not know, amigo. But she was a devil then, as she is now. Only now I know that is what she is. She wanted to get away from her nice parents, to live as a devil. But most of all, she wanted to betray me."

"So now you are troubled in spirit," said George. "It is understandable." He did not know what had happened to Catalina; he dreaded what truth might reveal.

"Do not make a mistake, amigo," Guillo went on. "I am not angry with you. I am only angry with myself. Why, you wonder, did I not strangle her with my fingers? Ah, you know my weakness, amigo. I could hardly do that to a woman, even though she would betray me. All night as we ride, I hate myself for being so sentimental, so squeamish. Not only do I spare her. I give her money and my second-best horse. It is possible she is already with my enemies. Did she not tell me she would live only to see me hanged?"

"It was my fault and is my regret," said George. "Yet I hope she will change her mind, for your sake, Guillo."

GUILLO LOOKED thoughtfully at George Almond. "You must sleep, amigo. Rough times may be ahead.

Above us there's a lookout spot. There I shall keep watch. One hour? Two? It will depend."

George closed his eyes. "Guillo, once more I'm grateful." He heard Guillo's footsteps in retreat.

When Guillo shook him awake, mid-day had passed.

Guillo's command was urgent. "Quickly, Alphonse. I think we are in for trouble."

George sprang up to find their horses already saddled, with bed rolls and saddlebags in place. "Are we betrayed, Guillo?"

"I should have killed her, Alphonse." "Catalina?"

Guillo nodded. "She is guiding our enemies to this spot. I should have exacted more of my memory, amigo. It was to this spot I brought her when she insisted on fleeing with me from Chihuahua. She has remembered it."

They mounted and followed a trail chosen by Guillo. It led them farther southeastward, away from water, away from pines and screening mountains.

But not away from danger. George was first to see dust ahead. "They've got us fenced, Guillo."

Guillo was looking eastward. "It is big country. Not only that, it is difficult to catch foxes, even in small countries. Eastward rises Sierra Sacramento. Guillo knows all of its best hiding places."

George shook his head. "Your beautiful Catalina may know those, too. Look!"

"This makes me very sad, Alphonse. We must go south."

"South is more to my purpose," said George. "That way lies Chihuahua City. Your lovely one may serve us well, after all. South, I suspect, is where she would least expect us to go."

They traveled south and west. Once they hid among bushes while three horsemen with deputy-sheriff badges rode past within fifty yards of them. Before another midnight they had reached El Rio Grande and water for

their horses. El Paso was not far away, on George's direct route to Chihuahua.

While George grazed their horses, Guillo sat against a tree and slept. This was, indeed, big country. Excitement of pursuit would not last long. Possemen would tire and desert for their ranches or places of business. After three or four days, none would be left of them except deputy sheriffs. Those would ride from ranch to ranch, make inquiry here, again there. Finally they, too, would give up, requirements of duty met, so far as their sense of duty extended.

Those who would not give up were Brock Tuel and his gunmen. Each man among them now had personal reasons for revenge. They would spread word to ranches throughout southern New Mexico, West Texas and even into Old Mexico. Reckless men would watch for them. Men with sordid sporting instincts would look forward to gunning them down. Others, mercenary of motive, would think of reward money.

Guillo awoke and called softly, "Amigo."

George led up their horses. "All's quiet, Guillo."

"Soon daylight will rise, Alphonse. Have you had food?"

"No."

"We still have bread and bacon, but we dare not build a fire."

THEY ATE bread and raw meat.

"What do you think, Guillo?"

"I think if we cross El Rio Grande at this point, we will still be in New Mexico."

"And if we don't?"

"We must go east, then south into Texas."

"You forget, Guillo, that my destination is Chihuahua City."

"I do not forget."

George stared absently at a tuft of grass. "I've been thinking while you slept, Guillo. By having me as your responsibility, you are assuming risks you would not otherwise have."

"You are growing tired of me?"

"You know me better than that, Guillo."

"You do not know this country as I do, amigo. If I stay with you until we are in Old Mexico, you will be safe. You have killed no one there. You have robbed no one. But I... Ah, amigo, luckily for me, I have committed no crime in Texas. So..."

"So we go to Texas, eh?" said George. "You are my good friend, Guillo; I trust you and your judgment completely."

Guillo, changing abruptly, said, "Alphonse, my lovely Catalina thought I was asleep when she went out of my cabin to where you slept in Sierra San Andres. But I was not asleep. I followed her. I heard all that she said. You did not betray my confidence, Alphonse. It is my love you have in return." Guillo mounted his horse. "Before dawn, we must cross El Paso Road."

There was some delay when Guillo's horse developed a loose shoe, which Guillo reset with expert hands. They were a mile east of El Paso Road at sunrise and in open country, when a stagecoach swung into view and swept on northward.

"I think that driver saw us," said George.

"You have good eyes," returned Guillo. "His report of seeing two strangers will be enough. Soon he will meet somebody who would like very much to find out who and where we are."

So far they had felt no necessity for pushing their horses. At Guillo's suggestion, however, they put them into a mile-eating lope and pressed on until noon. Their course had been steadily southeastward.

At noon they rested, ate cold bread and raw bacon.

Shortly before sundown they rested again, this time in a wind-blown cove. From there George climbed cautiously to a nearby eminence, shielded by chaparral, and made a cautious survey

of their surroundings. He gasped at what he saw and hurried down to report.

"Guillo, we're surrounded."

"How close?"

"Possibly two miles off, but converging. They know where we are."

"That stage driver," said Guillo despondently.

While they considered what to do, a small drove of pigs drifted into their sheltered spot.

"Food!" exclaimed George.

"Ah," returned Guillo, "if only we had no enemy near, how we could feast."

"Wait," George said. "I'm thinking."

"As a lawyer, amigo, or as a fugitive?"

George drew his sixguns. "As an actor, Guillo. Get ready. Empty your guns at those pigs."

"Our enemies will hear us, Alphonse. It is crazy."

"It is our one chance to elude our pursuers. Trust me, my cousin."

"My neck is no better than yours, even if I do love it better," said Guillo, lifting his guns.

George made his first shot count. "Don't kill any more of them, Guillo, but keep shooting."

TWENTY-FOUR shots were fired. Of course they were heard over an area of several square miles, even into Texas, whose border was less than two miles away.

Along that border about twenty horsemen were distributed. They heard gunfire, too. Then, several minutes later, they saw a lone rider coming over a rise of sage and cactus. Behind him followed a second horse, a magnificent black with what appeared to be a dead man curved over his silver-studded saddle. They could not be sure immediately, for two hundred yards separated them from what they saw. As that distance lessened, waiting riders drifted closer together and stared in curiosity.

"Looks like an old-timer," one commented.

"A dead one in tow," said another.

They waited and watched, six-guns and rifles forgotten.

Unhurriedly, apparently unconcerned about eyes that followed his movements, an old graybeard rode straight toward them, through their silent ranks and on southward into Texas. His shabby clothes and dark coloring indicated that he was Mexican. To all appearances he was unarmed.

Behind him was led that great black horse, a bloody corpse draped over his saddle, from whose pommel hung a gunbelt and two six-guns. Slowly this miserable procession moved on, disappeared into low ground, rose out of it onto higher ground, again went down out of sight.

An observer commented gloomily, "Looks like somebody made a mistake."

"That stage driver must've had bugs in his eyes," said another.

They figured that possemen had run upon that old Mexican and his younger companion, possibly his son, and started shooting without first finding out what they were shooting at. Too bad, but mistakes had happened before. They guessed they might as well head back north. Anybody connected with Guillo Musquizata would have known better than ride straight into his enemies like that.

As soon as they had lowered themselves out of sight and hearing of those who had so unwittingly allowed them to pass through their midst, George Almond and Guillo Musquizata assumed entirely different roles. George lowered his gunbelt from round his neck, where it had been concealed under his dirty shepherd's cloak, and fastened it round his waist. Guillo swung round and straightened in his saddle. With a grin he buckled on his own guns.

"Now," said George, "command is returned to you, my bloody cousin."

"Ugh!" grunted Guillo. "Pig's

blood! It makes me sick." He lifted his horse into an easy lope. "Come, amigo. We head east and south. It is a long road to Presidio and far off your course, but to Presidio we must go."

By nightfall they had eluded their pursuers. Nevertheless they rode onward. On their right, not many miles distant, flowed El Rio Grande. To leftward were hills, with occasional glimpses of distant mountains, visible mainly because of their irregular black-out of low-hanging stars.

PREFERRING not to disturb Guillo's meditations, George guessed those mountains to be Guadalupe Sierras, southeastern fragments of New Mexico's El Sierra Sacramento. Seldom did he see any sign of human habitation. Softly thudding hoofs accompanied by tinkle and squeak of riding gear, measured their monotonous miles. Its lonely hills, dark ravines and whispering, dry winds impressed this upon his mind as a land of nowhere, unreal, enchanted.

Sometime before dawn Guillo roused himself, drew his horse from an easy lope into a walk. "Did I sleep, amigo?"

"I think you slept these last four hours," said George. "But how could you do it?"

"Because for once in many, many weeks I felt secure and at peace. It shows my great confidence in you, amigo."

"What waked you?"

Guillo halted. George's horse, weary almost to exhaustion, stopped and lowered his head.

"I think," said Guillo, "there are soldiers not far ahead of us. It is an American army post I have seen from Mexico's side of El Rio. They would not molest us, unless they mistook us for offenders against American soil, which we are not. You see I, too, was born in New Mexico and have rights of American citizenship. But soldiers, ah, they would remember us to any

Texas officer who might inquire if we had been seen. And if inquirers happened to be your own special enemies, amigo, how would those soldiers know which of you to believe?"

"You are still in command, Guillo."

"My memory tells me a small stream runs down to El Rio Grande just ahead. Upstream two or three miles we should find shelter from searching eyes."

"We've never needed it more," said George.

Presently they came to where water ran in a deep pool across their road. They allowed their horses to drink, then turned upstream. At daylight they found grass for their horses and remains of a cabin, built probably by some settler who had dreamed of a cattle empire then deserted when ambition proved itself illusory.

George managed to stay awake until they had eaten breakfast, which consisted of broiled bacon, canned beans, coffee.

Afternoon was far along when he awoke.

Guillo was folding his saddle roll when George sat up. To George's surprise, a hot fire from dry sticks burned between cooking stones outside their temporary home. Suspended above it, something wrung slowly on a piece of rusty wire.

"Umm," George hummed with pleasure. "I smell food. What is it?"

"Ah," said Guillo, "it is nice to have company again. Pleasant dreams, eh? But this? Whoever once lived here left his swine behind when he went away. Those swine began a whole tribe of wild pigs. It was no trouble at all to snare one of them, as you see."

"You amaze me by your resourcefulness," said George. "What else happened while I slept?"

"Nothing at all," replied Guillo. "While our meat has been roasting I have done exploration of higher ground. As far as I could see, and it was for many miles, no sign of human life appeared. This is wild and desolate

country, amigo. I think it would be well if we spent some time here."

"How much time?"

"One week. Possibly two. Sooner or later it will be presumed that we have crossed El Rio Grande into Mexico. Those who now seek us to kill us will have given up and returned to their homes. What is more, you and I need rest. So do our horses. But most important of all to me, my thoughts are troubled. I need time to think."

"What troubles you, Guillo, if I may ask?"

"Of course you may ask, dear cousin. It is about myself, what to do. I have said to myself, 'If Alphonse can make himself up to look like some old grandfather, why cannot I do as much for me?' Is it possible, Alphonse?"

George got up and stretched himself. From habit his fingers ran over his face, felt his beard. He was badly in need of a shave. His fingers stilled, then slowly drew away.

"Guillo," he said thoughtfully, "I think it is possible."

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NEXT MORNING they undertook an experiment. When Guillo had been disguised as an old man, they decided that he should ride somewhere for supplies. Guillo's memory for places was excellent.

"An hour's ride from here there was once, according to legend, a settlement. Before Texas independence, Mexicans, it is said, called it Villa del Sierra Blanca. Wherever there is a village, there is food. Do I trust myself to go there, amigo?"

They walked together to where their horses grazed. George Almond surveyed his kinsman from every angle. "Yes, Guillo, if you are a good actor, you could deceive your own brother.

There is only one danger, as I see it; your horse and saddle would give you away."

"Of that I, too, was thinking," said Guillo. "My horse is even more famous than I."

"You are at liberty to ride mine," George suggested. "Certainly he has neither fame nor notoriety."

"Excellent," declared Guillo.

George saddled Whitefoot and stood aside while Guillo swung aboard. "Droop your shoulders a bit, Guillo."

"Like that?"

"Perhaps not so much. There, that is better. You might put a touch of feebleness into your voice, too."

Guillo made his voice tremble. "When I go into a store, I will say, 'Senor, I would like one week's provisions, so to speak.' Eh?"

"No, no," said George. "Do not say *senor*. Put it like this. 'Well, podner, how about some grub? Say, about ten pounds of bacon, twenty-five of flour, one of coffee, one of soda, two of salt.' Imagine you are an old Texan."

"And if he asks what my business is, what do I say?"

"He likely won't ask. But if he forgets himself and good manners, tell him your business is hunting Spanish silver."

"And if he asks my name?"

"If his ancestry is Texan, tell him your name is Crockett and that you are a distant cousin of Davy; that you were not at El Alamo with Davy because you were detained in Tennessee by measles."

"And if he is Mexican, I will tell him my business is none of his business."

"Exactly," said George. "And here is money with which to pay him his reasonable price for provisions."

"Ah, no, amigo. I have money. Besides what is in my pockets, I have money hidden in many places, in all a great fortune. But lest we be separated, give me my saddlebags and roll."

George put them in place for him. "One other detail, Guillo. If anything

happens to separate us from meeting again at this spot, what do you suggest?"

Guillo ran that through his mind. "I know a place," he said. "Southeast by one day's ride there is a town called Van Horn. There I shall wait for you. If I do not meet you at once, it will mean there is a reason for my not doing so. Again, if I am not there, and something happens to cause you to need my company more, this is how you will find me. There's a stream at Van Horn. Ride up this stream, by day or by night as circumstances require, and you will find me. I will make myself known by trilling as a bird. Like this. Adios, amigo."

"Adios, my cousin."

George on foot followed at a distance until he had topped a low ridge. There he stopped and watched Guillo ride away, apparently an old man, his hair and whiskers almost white, his shoulders bent. For George, this parting seemed somewhat ominous. He hoped they would meet again soon. Guillo had come to seem like his own brother.

WHEN AN hour had passed, he let his imagination play upon what likely was taking place in some store. Guillo, pretending to be an old man, was making his purchases. His forties might cause mild suspicion, but should evoke no questions. His false hair and whiskers looked too natural to be taken as otherwise. If he would only remember to make his voice sound old, his lapse into Spanish accents would be overlooked, for hardly a generation had passed since this ceased to be Mexican territory.

For Guillo's especial sake, George hoped their experiment would succeed. If it did, Guillo would take courage. Guillo was young. Somewhere he could begin a settled, respectable life. What he needed was opportunity, determination, faith in himself.

When two hours had passed, George began to expect Guillo's return. As

minutes thereafter multiplied, anxiety displaced expectation.

When three hours had passed, uneasiness caused him to saddle Guillo's great black horse, strap on his own supplies and toss saddlebags into place. As other minutes passed and Guillo did not show up, George mounted and rode up to where he had last seen him. He must have been thoroughly careless of his own safety, for he had no sooner ridden onto a high, barren spot when a rifle bullet clipped past his face.

"It's Guillo Musquizata," a man shouted. "Get him, men."

George Almond had almost ridden into an ambush. While he had been caught off guard, he had also surprised those who had been moving up to surround and kill him. He could not have mistaken that voice. It belonged to Brock Tuel.

George instantly wheeled and rode for cover. Out of sight, he had his choice of directions. He took that which he regarded as least likely to be anticipated, had he been pursuer instead of pursued. He rode back to his camp, then downstream a short distance, where he turned east and headed for Presidio Road. He had seen only five men, including Tuel, but common sense told him there were others, converging from other directions.

While ridge and brush separated him from Tuel's group, he rode at great speed, eastward, southward, as circumstances of cover and speed dictated. Occasionally he stopped to listen, was satisfied at last that temporarily he was out of danger.

Several minutes later he saw distantly what appeared to be a village. Villa del Sierra Blanca, he supposed it to be. By then he had reached Presidio Road. Fearing that Guillo had fallen into a trap in Sierra Blanca, George decided to leave that village to his left. Accordingly he turned right, into a region of brush and yucca.

He had an additional reason for this change of course. Distantly he had seen

an approaching stagecoach. It had been little more than a dark spot moving ahead of dust. This time he was determined that its driver should have no tales to take westward.

He rode still farther to his right and returned to Presidio Road only when Sierra Blanca lay miles behind.

Southward lay wilderness, with nothing in sight to indicate presence of water. Eastward before sunset, however, he had seen trees, which indicated a stream.

It proved to be both a town and a stream. Before riding in, he circled northward, watered his suffering animal and lay down for a rest.

IN TOWN an hour later he found a feed barn with a signboard which read, *See Bovil For Horses*. He dismounted, hitched, and walked in to where a lantern burned in a corner office. A plainly dressed man of near fifty years looked up at him with shrewd, appraising eyes.

"Are you Mr. Bovil?" George asked.

"I'm Sam Bovil, if that's what you mean."

George smiled. "That's what I mean."

"Fine, fine," said Bovil. He got up and shook hands with George. "What can I do for you?"

"You can feed my horse," said George.

"Fetch him in."

George went out and returned with Guillo Musquizata's fine black, which showed evidence of hard riding. He unsaddled him and turned him over to Bovil. "He's had a hard day. If you had somebody around to give him some brushing, that would be excellent."

"Got a Mexican hired for that very business," Bovil informed him heartily. "Diego, come here pronto."

From remote shadows a youthful Mexican appeared. "Si, senor?"

"Take this horse and rub him down. See he's well fed." Bovil glanced downward. "I'd say, judging by his muddy feet, he's had water."

"He has," said George.

As Guillo's horse was led away, Bovil looked him over with an appreciative eye. "Mighty fine horse you've got there, stranger."

"None better," said George.

"Sure don't come no better than that in Van Horn." Bovil-eyed George as he might have scrutinized an animal, sized him up as one without sentiment. "Would four hundred dollars interest you?"

"Sorry," said George. "When he's had grain and hay, will you have him saddled again?"

"Yes, sir, stranger."

Being twice addressed as a stranger was construed by George as an invitation to make his identity known. He declined to do so, however, and walked off to where he had seen a restaurant sign.

George found a vacant table and dropped into a chair. When he had ordered and was eating, he tensed at what was being said by a stranger at his back.

"Well, sir, I had some business in Blanca, which is neither here nor there. Was loafing with some fellows I know, hanging around outside Snape Callender's general store, when this old-timer rides up on a big red horse, a forty-five at each hip and a belt full of cartridges. He humps into Callender's store and after a while he comes out with a gunny sack of groceries. But while Old Whiskers is inside, a couple of tough looking hombres ease round a corner and start looking at that horse. One points to a front foot and says, 'Look there, it's been painted red. Paint's wearing off.' His buddy says, 'Yeah, it's Almond all right. But what about them whiskers?'"

George felt his heart thumping. To conceal any evidence of excitement his face might have reflected, he kept his head lowered.

"Sure, sure," said a listener, "what about them whiskers?"

"Yeah, that's what I wondered," the narrator continued. "One of them ran-

nies said, speaking kind of low, 'Remember what them Texans said out from El Paso about an old man riding by, leading a black horse with a dead man over his back? That was George Almond, wearing Santa Claus whiskers.' It was about then this old-timer comes out with his sack of groceries. He ain't no more than out than them two rannies go for their guns. I figure my eyes are pretty quick at seeing things, but I don't see that old-timer draw his guns. Suddenly they're just up and spitting fire. Them two hard-cases are dead before they even get their guns out."

"Then what?" somebody asked.

"Well, I'll tell you. Old Whiskers stands there, a gun in each hand, and stares at me out of unblinking orbs that look like snake eyes. I figure he's waiting for me to do something, which I ain't even considerin'. 'Mister,' I says, 'them fellers ain't no part of my outfit. Never seen 'em before, nowhere.'

"Old Whiskers keeps staring, waiting for me to talk, I reckon. I sure did talk, too. 'Mister,' I says, 'them hombres was gunnin' for you. I saw it all. You shot 'em in self-defense. But I don't mind tellin' you something,' I says. 'This town's got a mighty ornery sheriff. He won't believe nothing nobody tells him. It's no business of mine, podner, but if I was you I'd high-tail it to parts remote before he hears of this and gets a posse rounded up.'

"Those snake eyes crinkle a little then. 'Thanks, podner,' Old Whiskers says, in a kind of West Texas drawl. He reloads his guns right then and there, picks up his gunny sack, lays it over his horse's withers, and pulls hisself up. He don't bother to look back, but heads out north, taking his time as if nothing has happened."

George felt like shouting for joy. Until now he had worried, fearing that Guillo had been killed. He understood, also, why Guillo had not returned to their hideout. Any likelihood of pur-

suit by a posse would have caused him to think not of his own safety, but of that of his cousin.

George paid for his meal and returned for his horse.

He was at Bovil's when eleven riders pounded into town from the west. They dismounted, looked about cautiously, then tramped into the place George had just left.

Their leader was Tuel.

As George rode into the night to find Guillo, he was saying to himself, *I've had enough. A worm would already have turned.*

- 9 -



FROM VAN HORN to Presidio, the distance was approximately one hundred fifty miles; measured in days of hard riding, about three. For George Almond to make that distance required one month, a fact which of itself indicated that he had followed a devious trail, indeed. When he rode into Presidio during late morning hours, his guise was that of a Texas cowhand in his Sunday best. He was riding his own horse again, a magnificent red whose white foot had once more been painted red.

He came to a rail where several horses had been hitched. There he left Whitefoot and tramped into an eating place called *El Cafe de Peralta*. Eyes of patrons turned toward him, in them admiration, awe, suspicion, all mixed together. His two fine guns drew especial attention.

He strode to a table where only two men were eating. "Gentlemen, may I join you?"

"Sure," both of them answered.

George took them to be cattlemen. They were past forty years of age, had mustaches, showed signs of much

[Turn To Page 80]

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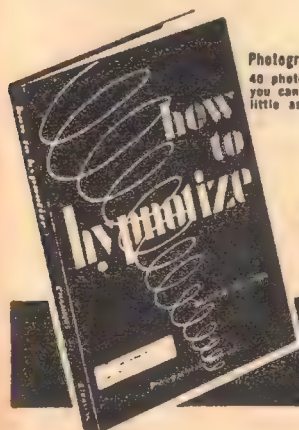
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weathering, and had in their faces expressions of friendly confidence.

One said, "I'm Tim Mercer." He turned a thumb toward his companion. "This is my neighbor, Barney Longford."

George reached and shook their hands. "I'm George Almond, lawyer from New Mexico, more especially from Ciudad de Leona Vicario."

"Sure glad to meet you, Almond," said Mercer. "When you first dropped in I thought you might be that phantom feller we've been hearing about for some weeks now. Saw you ride up out there. That big red horse made me think so."

"Phantom?" said George, lifting puzzled eyebrows.

"Yeah," said Mercer. "By latest reports, at least ten men have been found dead in West Texas, scattered between here and El Paso and north, toward Pecos."

There were eleven, George thought. But he looked amazed. "Never heard of such slaughter. Any idea..."

"No, sir," said Mercer. "There's a rumor this phantom rides a red horse with a white foot and kills only at night."

Barney Longford shook his head. "That's not how I heard it, Tim. Way I heard it, he rides a black horse of tremendous speed."

"Well," said Mercer, "we're agreed on one thing, I reckon. Whatever he rides, he's fast and deadly with his guns."

When George had given his order to a waitress, he shook his head at Mercer and Longford. "Beats me. I'd think Texas officers would put a stop to those killings."

"Rangers have done some investigating. What they know, they're not telling. But you can't keep sheriffs and deputies from talking. Rumor is, that those dead men, at least so many as have been identified, were wanted men—murderers, rustlers, stage robbers, and such—some of them Texans,

originally. Seems, however, they've lately drifted into Texas from New Mexico. Texas officers don't have much interest in them, except satisfaction from knowing they're dead. Best they can figure, so far as these officers have talked, is that some old gang members have fell out and decided to get rid of each other."

"Interesting possibility," said George.

Food was brought, and all three fell to eating.

Tim Mercer, however, seemed more interested in talking than in eating. "One story that's come out of those killings would crinkle your hair," he said.

"You mean about them two that met in the dry wash?" asked Longford.

GEORGE swallowed and tried to seem not unduly interested. "What about them?"

"Well," said Mercer, "it's a cowboy yarn. This cowboy, Shank Donaghey, one of Les Overland's outfit, says he decided to ride up a ridge to look for strays, which he did. While still screened by brush, he saw this phantom ride into one end of the draw on a splendid red horse with a white foot. Almost at that same instant, another rider drifted in from the opposite direction. This last hombre, riding a bay horse, was big and mean looking. A two-gunner, according to Shank Donaghey. When them two saw each other, recognition must've been sudden. Anyhow, they stopped. The big fellow turned to get away, but this other hailed him, called him by name. Tule, Towell, or something. Asked him if he'd turned yellow.

"Shank couldn't hear much of what was said, but he figured they had a score to settle. Maybe the big brute got over his scare, or maybe he didn't. According to Shank, who's knowed to be sort of windy, another rider appeared, this one on a great black horse. Between him and the man on the red horse, Tule, or Tool, whatever his

[Turn To Page 82]

ROYAL JELLY, the Queen Bee's Special Food...ITS SECRET OF PROLONGED LIFE!

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ROYAL JELLY-A FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH COCTAIL? For the Queen Bee

ROYAL JELLY MAKES HEADLINES

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Chicago Tribune

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From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

At this moment, in Leading Universities, Scientists and Nutritionists and Medical Doctors are doing extensive work to determine the exact role that Royal Jelly may play in Your Sex Life, Your Health and Your Emotional Condition. These researchers are especially interested in its effects on those who have passed middle age. They are working on Royal Jelly because this rare NATURAL FOOD has been indicated to contain remarkable Energy and Sex Factors.

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• Dr. de Fomade, 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics, Baden-Baden, Germany: April 5, 1956.

• Dr. Maurice Mathias, Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.

• Cowdry's Problem of Aging, Thomas S. Gardner, (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July, 1953.)

• Analysis of Royal Jelly and Pollen, Nevil Weaver and Kenneth A. Kulken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station).

• Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly, Thomas S. Gardner, (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists, and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

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• Royal Jelly alleviates suffering of men and women in their critical years in a sensational manner.

• Royal Jelly acts on weakened, tired eyes, giving instantly a sensation of new light.

• Feeling of tiredness disappears immediately.

• Royal Jelly gives a feeling of increased sexual drive and energy, especially to men and women over 40.

• Glanular studies may lead to new hope for men and women.

• Royal Jelly produces a pleasing state of relaxed well-being and eases tension.

DISCOVERER OF INSULIN Dr. Frederick Banting

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name, was in a squeeze. He turned back then, and he and the first rider swung off their horses and walked slowly toward each other. When about fifty yards apart they stopped. They swapped words, fighting words, I reckon. The big man went into a crouch, then came up with his guns—both guns."

"Which was a mistake," said Longford. "Two guns are all right for close fighting, but not for that distance. They make for inaccuracy. Also, they cause a man to present too broad a front to his adversary."

"Gospel truth," said Mercer. "Well, this phantom who was tall and slim must have agreed with you. He drew his righthand gun and turned his right side toward his enemy. The two-gunner fired twice with each gun, but their bullets kicked up dust far down the

draw. This tall phantom feller fired once, and dust that was kicked up was on the big feller's vest. He must've been a hard one to kill. It took two more shots to finish him. That was all, except that before he moved out of his tracks this man who rode the red horse calmly reloaded his gun."

George, alternately hot and cold, sleeved sweat from his forehead. "Interesting story. Any idea who they were?"

Mercer glanced at Longford. "Not altogether," he said. "This Shank Donaghey says he went down and searched the dead man when those two strange riders had gone. Found some papers. What was the name, Barney?"

"Tuel, I believe," replied Longford.

[Turn To Page 84]

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George lifted his eyebrows. "Brock Tuel?"

"Yeah," said Longford. "That was it. Papers showed he was from New Mexico. Maybe you knowed him?"

"I did," said George. "Knew him well. He was from Vicario. What could he have been doing in Texas?"

Tim Mercer shook his head. "What could any of them have been doing in Texas?"

George responded thoughtfully, "What is anyone doing anywhere?"

An hour later he crossed El Rio Grande into Ojinaga.

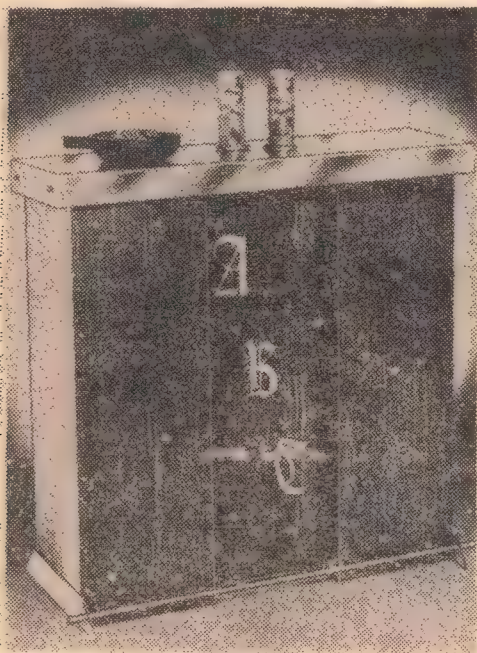
ALMOST a year had passed since George Almond's departure from

Marsh Granville's cottage on a western slope of Sierra San Andres. Granville and his daughter Jonica were packing their trunks and suitcases. They had almost finished, only enough of their belongings being left out to keep them fed and comfortable one more night.

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[Turn To Page 86]



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silence. On their rare trips to Vicario,
she had for a while picked up interest,
but that interest had not lasted. They
had not again seen Almond. Jonica
read books, as always. Even so, her
attention wandered from them.

THESE MOODS of hers, as well as
his health consideration, had en-
tered into his decision to return East.
Jonica needed new surroundings; a
chance to meet young men.

"Yes," he told her stoutly, "my
health is good now."

"It is not for economic reasons, is
it? If it is, I can teach in Vicario. You
know, don't you, that I've been asked
to teach?"

"I heard about it."

He had also heard that George Al-
mond had returned to Vicario, that Al-
mond was likely to become very rich,
that he was much talked about and
with great favor, that a long-lost silver
lode in which he owned one-half in-
terest had been rediscovered on El
Rancho Grande del San Xavier. Al-
mond had returned in early May. Now
it was almost June. Jonica had heard,
of course. That it mattered to her was
evidenced by her accentuated loneli-
ness, by moodiness that increased as
days passed.

"You believe I could do all right
with teaching, don't you?" she asked
distantly.

"For small children, you would do
wonderfully."

"And I'm seventeen now. I ought to
be thinking of doing some kind of
work, don't you think?"

"It has long been a tradition in our
family that everyone should be self-
supporting. Not that everyone should
actually work for a living, but that
everyone should be able to be eco-
nomically independent."

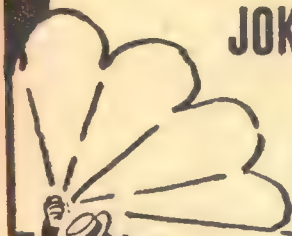
Jonica had closed a trunk. She sat
on it and looked about to see what

[Turn To Page 88]

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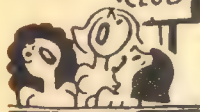
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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

should be done next. "I think I would like teaching," she said.

Granville had been sitting. From their belongings he had reserved his spy-glass. "If there's nothing else just now, I think I'll sit outside. New Mexico sunsets present pictures we won't have back East."

He went out to their small porch and sat down in an old chair that would have to be left behind. For several minutes he sat there in meditation. In his decision to return East, possibly there had been self-interest, as well as concern for Jonica. If she truly wished to stay in New Mexico, it was not too late for him to change his mind. Certainly he wanted to do what was best for her. If she liked to live here, he would not mind living here himself. New Mexico had stolen into him, entwined itself about him by unseen tendrils, planted in his consciousness a sense of nearness to invisible forces.

Out there below him, earth itself had performed miracles of change, of death and rebirth, of dullness and color. Only short weeks ago, Onate's desert had bloomed into colorful life. West winds that swept across Jornada del Muerto had brought perfumes, as from Elysian fields. Oneness existed not in desert changelessness, nor in its ever-changing face, but in his sense of unity with it and with its wind and sky. Yes, he could live here in contentment, if it suited Jonica best.

But there was this heaviness upon her heart. Though she never spoke of it, he knew what it was and its cause.

Far westward, sunset colors began to show as sun's great disc changed from blazing gold to orange, then to red. Granville lifted his telescope, placed it before his right eye, moved it back and forth.

Suddenly he sat erect. Down below, only a few miles out, an object moved

[Turn To Page 90]

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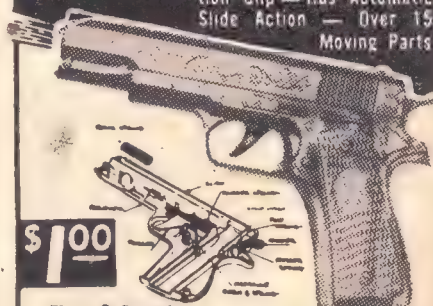
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and small puffs of dust rose and were dispersed by wind.

"Jonical!" he shouted. "Jonica!"

She came quickly, her expression one of alarm. "Father, what's wrong?"

His hands trembled. "Nothing, Jonica. Nothing's wrong."

"You sounded as if you'd been hurt."

"No, Jonica. Far from it. Here." He handed his glass to her. "Take a look, will you?"

Puzzled, yet showing excitement, she squinted her left eye and looked with her right. Slowly she searched.

GRANVILLE slid his chair round to where he could watch her face. When her search had fixed itself upon an object, he saw her tremble. Her months of wistfulness and longing now completed their story. There was no longer any mystery.

Her lips parted, quivered. Then she cried, "George! It's George! He's coming. He's coming back."

She ran inside. She cried until she was almost hysterical.

Granville, too, went in. Jonica had fallen onto a chair. He lifted her, wiped her tears with his handkerchief.

"He's half an hour away, Jonica. That's just time enough for you to get into something pretty."

She put her arms around him and cried some more. Then she sobered and pushed herself away. "You are right," she said. "You are exactly right."

Granville went back to his post of observation. Almond approached steadily, but distances were deceptive. Certainly he was still two miles away.

Ten minutes later Granville called, "How are you doing, Jonica?"

"Oh, fine. Where is he now?"

"He's at least a mile out."

Granville watched, at times with his telescope, at other times without it. With it he could now see Almond's

[Turn To Page 92]



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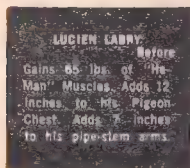
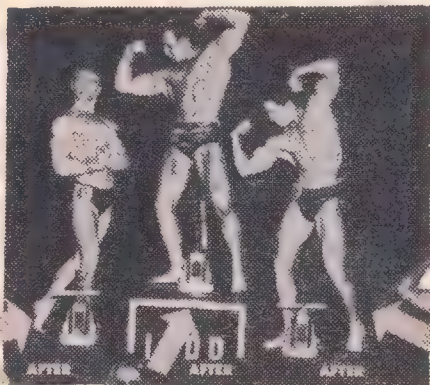
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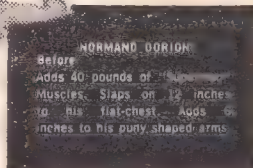
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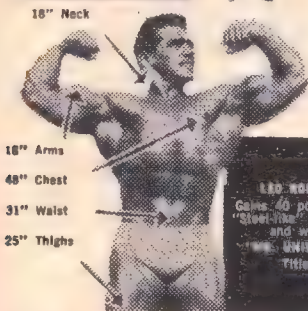
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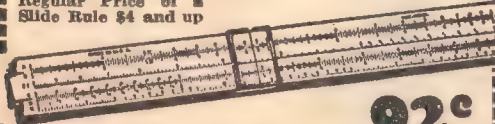
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face, even his very expression. He was looking upward, expectancy clearly written.

"Where is he, father?" Jonica called in high excitement.

"He's getting close, almost ready to start up. Pretty soon I won't be able to see him." Granville watched now until Almond had reached the upward trail and was out of sight.

Jonica came out then. She was dressed in white. "How do I look, father?"

Granville gazed at her, as one in a trance. There had been a time when he was young, when he had come to call upon a young lady. He had never known freedom again. Not that he had wished to be free. It had been a kind of captivity that only death could end.

"Once he has seen you again, Jonica, he is lost forever."

She was too full of happiness now for words. Carefully she went down, step by step, and followed her familiar path. He watched with aching heart, yet with gladness. Their spring was under a cliff, just below. Stone steps led down to it. She did not descend, but waited.

After a while her hands lifted and clasped themselves tightly.

Granville heard a shout then.

"Jonica!"

"George!" she cried in answer.

Then she descended.

Afterwards there were soft cries of joy, broken sentences, words, silence. Silence, except for winds and their eternal whispers.

Light of The Eagle's Plume

(continued from page 7)

white man's. The grave was made ready and the body lower. Then the stately old Umatilla broke the silence. He said, "My light has gone out—the sun does not shine for me—my heart is dead—I shall go down into the grave

[Turn To Page 94]

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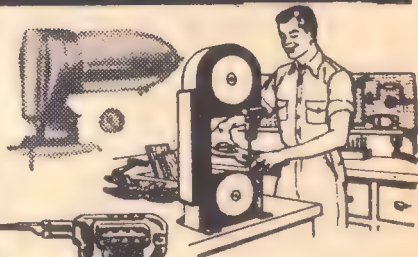
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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

with my son—my body shall be covered with his." So saying he sank slowly to the ground. Life had fled; he was indeed dead of a broken heart.

And today in a lonely spot on the banks of the Columbia lies the bones of Umatilla in the same grave as that of "Light of the Eagle's Plume," both wearing in death the plumes of the black eagle secured from Black Eagle falls near the present city of Great Falls Montana...

FEUDIN' GUNS

(continued from page 45)

thinking. Here was chance to cover th' shortages, an' deliver Larry at th' same time.

"If'n th' Cats had made good he'd have sworn that he'd been robbed of fifty-sixty thousand dollars, but that scheme backfired.

"I wus never shore of yuh, Pat," he continued, drawing at a cigar he had lit while talking. "Yore record was bad. Larry ridin' to' th' Bar-C that night made it look like yuh was in cahoots. When yuh busted into my camp down at th' barrens I had th' Cats' hideout taped an' was waitin' f'r th' rurales t' clean th' skunks up. I figgered by then yuh wus on th' square, but I couldn't take th' chance."

"So now Lyman's in th' hoosegow," commented Pat.

"Dead. Suicide! When I laid th' cards on th' table in Lyman's office he figgered a lead pill was better than twenty years in th' pen."

Pat sprang to his feet. "Dammit! it just don't seen possible, May safe, the Bar-C mine an' th' Cats crushed." He loosed a shrill yippee that shook the ceiling.

"Why Pat!" A calm feminine voice at the doorway jerked three heads around. A slim, young woman, raven hair neatly gathered under a trim Stetson, strolled in.

[Turn To Page 96]

Wonder Slim

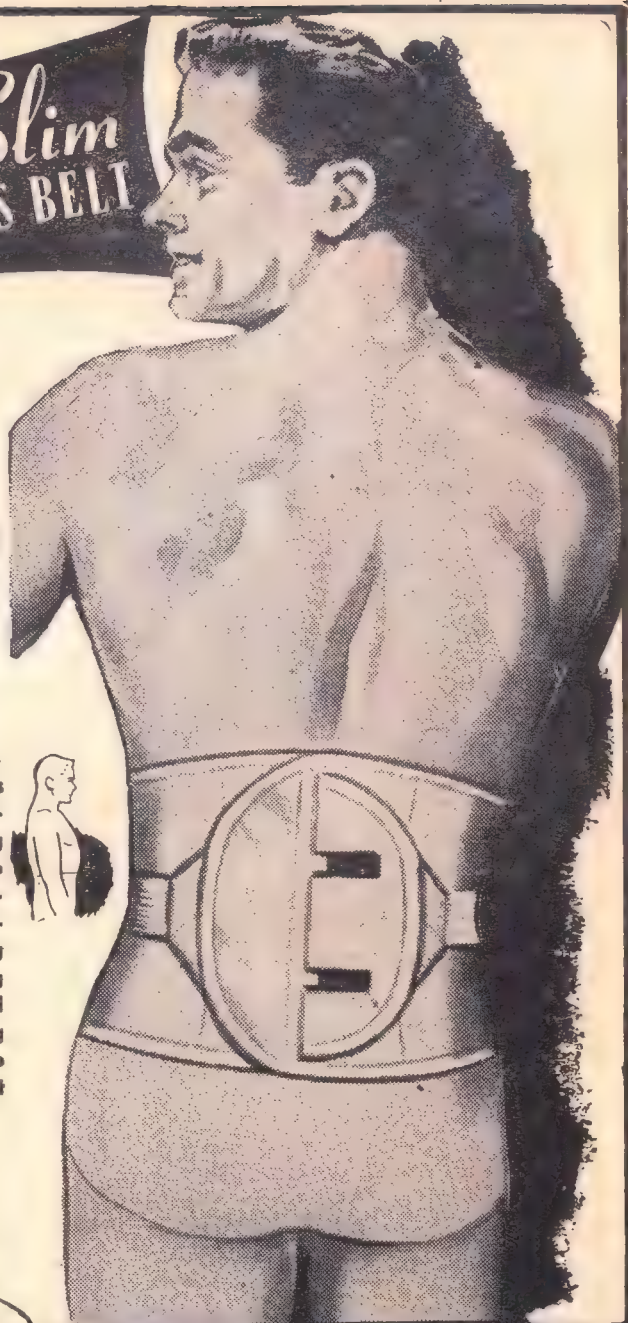
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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

Oblivious of the admiring stares of the two lawmen, her radiant eyes sought the Bar-C boss.

"Oh, Pat," she breathed. "Everything's all right now. Isn't it wonderful? I just couldn't wait!"

"Hey! wait a minute," said Pat as he advanced upon her. "Yuh were mighty sore at me th' last time we had a talk—what's happened?"

"I had another little talk—with Stella Yarrow," smiled May. "But that will serve as a reminder of what will happen if you ever try to get away from me again."

Like a cyclone, Pat descended upon her and his arms enveloped her unre-sisting form.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION OF

Action Packed Western published quarterly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1st, 1957.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., managing editor, none, business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

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Louis H. Silberkleit (Signature of publisher) Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1957.

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The Passing of Belial Young

by Edward Garner

Belial Lucifer Young, a gent
With a codfish sort of face,
Who was also known as Satan Young,
Was an extra select disgrace.
In his baleful eyes glowed the sign of
Cain,
And hate of the human race.

He rode one day into Mesa Flats;
He hitched his horse to a rail,
And slithered to Gopher Pete's saloon,
Where he called for a glass of ale,
As the beady eyes in the codfish face
Seemed to peer far down evil's trail!

The facts reaveal that Young was a
heel,
A coward, and yellow, too,
Whose rattler's eyes took note of size
In his deeds of derring-do,
Who bullied the small and weak, that
he
Might have no cause for rue!

His meanness at par, he stood at the
bar,
And then, with a pelting curse,
He kicked a waif whose name was
Rafe;
Then his luck went in reverse,

For Rafe was a midget, but one whose
gun
Did the lethal lead disburse!

The midget scowled, and Belial
howled,
As the small one's lead went home,
And Belial knew that he was through,
For the bullet went to his dome—
Lodge in his brain to cleanse the stain
Of a snake who would no more roam!

They took him away for his Boot Hill
lay,
And some kindly person placed
Some horns at his head for a head-
stone, so

His memory would not be erased,
And a rattler rattled the requiem
Of the thug sped to hell in haste!

*A curious fact—one that is backed
By the word of Marshal Strakes
To wit, that Rafe, the crack shot waif,
Threw his gun in a nearby lake—
Lest he should shoot some straight
outlaw
With a gun that had killed a snake!*



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